

THE PUNISHER

D. A. STERN BASED ON
THE ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY
BY JONATHAN HENSLEIGH



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THE PUNISHER

**The official novelization of the film
by D. A. Stern**

**Based on the original screenplay
by Jonathan Hensleigh**



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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Acknowledgements
By D. A. Stern

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Published by Ballantine Books:

DARK ANGEL: THE EYES ONLY DOSSIER THE PUNISHER

For Amorette, with appreciation and thanks

PART ONE

CRIME

15 June 1840 Hours

Crossed wires. Not a good omen.

At one P.M. this afternoon, Divisional HQ pulled the plug on Ares. Two years of work, one agent's life, my family's sanity . . . all of them almost went right down the drain then and there.

Took almost three hours of Weeks massaging egos and making phone calls before they restored support to the op, gave us the green light again for tonight.

I heard about this only twenty minutes ago-a message Weeks left in my voice mail box. I don't think he would have told me at all, but he had to make sure word hadn't reached me some other way, that I knew we had a go.

What happened was this: OCB had sent a memo out, six months ago, asking all Tampa-based ops to clear everything through them. Protocol, pulling rank, whatever you want to call it-all we had to do was send them a note about what we had planned for this evening, and we would have been okay.

The memo never got sent. Weeks made noises about having delegated that task to Clark or Shannon, but that's bullshit. It's totally on him, totally his fault OCB had no paperwork about Ares. Something's happened to him in the last year, since he settled in here as AIC. He lets things slide, slip through the cracks . . . he wasn't like this before, God knows. Maybe it's age-maybe it's his divorce. I don't know. Doesn't really matter.

This afternoon, OCB was talking to the Tampa PD about something else, and our op got mentioned.

They, naturally, went through the roof.

Called Washington, faxed over their memo, and had all the support we'd lined up-local law enforcement, logistics,

Justice Department-withdrawn. Said Ares had the potential to interfere with ongoing surveillance they were running.

Lucky Weeks was able to convince Washington that our op had to take priority-national security concerns trumping OCB's attempts to get the dirt on a local dirtbag name of Howard Saint.

I've heard of him, of course-he is big down here, and getting bigger-but haven't yet had the pleasure. Doubtful that I ever will-Saint and I travel in different circles.

On top of which, after tonight, I am out of Florida entirely, not likely to return.

Op is only a few hours away. Must prepare.

[Entry Ends.]

ONE

Trouble was coming.

Howard Saint saw it through the polarized lenses of his Persols, through the tinted glass of his limousine, through the throng of well-wishers and paparazzi crowded around the entrance to Saints and Sinners. Trouble in the form of a round, balding man in his early fifties, a businessman in a light blue windbreaker he had no reason to wear on this warm Tampa evening. A windbreaker that bulged suspiciously underneath one armpit as the man pushed his way through the crowd and headed for Saint's limousine as it pulled up to the curb.

"Reston," Saint said softly, a faint smile on his face. "What an idiot."

"Howard? What is it?"

Saint turned. His wife, Livia, next to him in the back of the limo, was leaning toward him, trying to peer through his window.

"Peter Reston," Saint repeated, pointing. "He's brought a gun. No doubt intends to use it on me."

Livia saw the man and frowned in disgust.

"For God's sake. I told you he was going to be a problem."

"You were right." Saint didn't bother adding that he'd suspected as much himself, after the ugly scene in Reston's offices last Friday. After the man had realized that the business he'd spent his entire life building was now worthless, that his only chance at avoiding bankruptcy was to sell his assets (at a fraction of their actual worth, of course) to Saint Holdings. To Howard Saint, the architect of his fall.

The realization had not—needless to say—made him happy.

"You bastard," Reston had said, rising from behind his desk, his face twisted in hatred. "You cold-blooded, double-

dealing bastard. I trusted you.”

Reston stood over Saint, both hands clenched into fists, literally trembling with anger.

“I’ll kill you, Howard,” he said. “I swear to God I’ll kill you.”

Saint had looked up at the man and given him the same faintly amused smile he wore right now.

“Don’t be an idiot, Peter,” he’d said, and stood up himself. “You’ll do nothing of the kind.”

The two men had faced each other then, eye to eye, almost toe to toe, barely a foot apart. There was a floor-to-ceiling mirror behind Reston’s desk—Saint remembered looking at it, seeing himself and Reston reflected in its surface, and thinking that the contrast between the two of them couldn’t have been greater.

Reston, red-faced, sweating, shaking, crammed into a suit that had probably last fit him a dozen years ago, about when it was last in style. Saint in a black, crew-neck T-shirt and gray blazer (the outfit Livia preferred him in, above all others) looking tan, fit, calm. Commanding.

“My advice to you is to deal with the facts,” he told Reston calmly. “Reston Motors is mine. Take the offer I’m making for your assets—the inventory, the database programming, the body shop—and start over.” He flashed a smile. “Just stay out of the car dealership business. A little friendly advice.”

Reston glared. “Fuck your friendly advice. And fuck you, Howard.”

For an instant, Saint thought the man might swing at him. He wouldn’t have minded that—a chance to complete the man’s humiliation by bloodying his nose—literally.

But, of course, Reston did nothing of the kind. Perhaps he’d seen Saint’s own willingness to fight, and thought better of it. Or perhaps he was just a coward.

Or perhaps, he’d just wanted to run home to bring a little equalizer to bear. The bulge hidden underneath his windbreaker.

“Pathetic,” Saint said, and tapped on the glass between the driver and passenger compartments. The barrier lowered— Dante, who was driving tonight, had a hand pressed to the earpiece in his right ear, was nodding even as he turned around.

“We have a problem,” Saint said. “Reston’s here.”

“Yes, sir. Lincoln just spotted him. How do you want to handle it?”

“Quietly,” Saint said.

Livia leaned forward in her seat. “Permanently.”

Saint smiled.

Reston had called him cold-blooded, which was certainly the case, but his wife was the single most ruthless, relentless person Howard Saint had ever met. Those who turned against her, those who hurt her . . . she made them pay a thousand times over. A survival trait, no doubt, acquired during her singularly brutal childhood in Ybor City. He’d long ago given up on trying to cure her of it. In this instance, there was no need to.

In this instance, she was right.

“As Mrs. Saint said,” he told Dante, “permanently.”

“Yes, sir.” Dante spoke quietly into the small microphone in his lapel, relaying Saint’s instructions, as Saint himself sat back and squeezed his wife’s hand.

Livia was wearing a simple red dress, low-cut and fairly short, which she made look anything but simple. Chanel, of course, as were the wrap and the hat she’d chosen to complete her ensemble. His wife’s taste was exquisite, and expensive, just as his was. One of the many reasons they made such a perfect couple.

“You look beautiful,” he said. “They’ll put you on the front page of the society section tomorrow.”

“I don’t dress for them. I dress for you,” she said, leaning forward and brushing his lips with hers. Saint felt a stirring in his body—even after twenty years, he still found his wife

the most alluring, desirable, provocative woman he had ever met.

“We’ll make it an early night,” he said.

“Here.” She smiled again. “An early night *here*.”

Saint was about to respond when he caught a flurry of movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked up just in time to see Lincoln and Cutter walk past his window, Reston squeezed in between them, helpless. They were guiding him past the crowd queued up in front of the club, down the sidewalk and across the street now. Toward, fitting enough, the Saint Motors lot there, which was now—with his purchase of Reston’s assets—the single biggest luxury car dealership in the state of Florida.

Of course at this time of night, the dealership would be completely deserted. Perfect for his purposes. Not so for the unlucky Peter Reston.

The limousine pulled the last few feet up the drive, and stopped in front of the club entrance.

As Dante exited the car, Saint rolled down his window. Good crowd tonight—Saints and Sinners was never going to be much more than a break-even proposition (what nightclub ever was?), but at least the past few months, they had stopped losing money. A good thing, too—he knew John would have hated having the place shut down. The club had been his pet project, and his son—both sons, in fact, John and Bobby—spent a considerable amount of time here. As did Saint himself. He had an office upstairs, next to the private club rooms, one where he often conducted business that wouldn’t have been . . . appropriate to deal with downtown.

Dante came around the back of the car and opened the door.

Saint stepped out, and the crowd surged.

Flashbulb after flashbulb went off.

Saint waved—making sure to catch the eye of the Times’s photographer—and then turned to help Livia out of the car.

Reporters began to shout out questions.

"Any firm decision yet on the gubernatorial race, Mr. Saint?"

"Are you fund-raising now?"

"What about your family? How do they feel about you getting into politics?"

"Mr. Saint!"

"Howard Saint!"

"Over here—Mr. Saint!"

Saint kept a smile glued on his face, and continued to wave and walk forward, one hand on Livia's arm. Dante was pressing through the crowd, blazing a way for them to the club's front door.

"There are rumors about an FBI investigation into Saint Holdings, Mr. Saint. Any comment?"

A step away from the entrance, Saint froze.

He'd recognized the last reporter's voice instantly—Danny Palmer, from the *Tampa Times*. Five feet, six inches of irritation, as far as Saint was concerned. Since the day that Saint had begun to formulate his plans, the man had been all over him, into every aspect of his business. Writing piece after piece on his companies, his family, himself, none of it openly hostile, but all of it filled with innuendo and suggestion, all of it intimating that Howard Saint, two-time Chamber of Commerce president, Tampa's wealthiest and most successful businessman, was nothing more than a crook.

And now this. Spreading rumors of an FBI investigation. Saint couldn't have that story out there—not now.

Even if it was true.

"Does that concern you, Mr. Saint?" Palmer called out. "An FBI investigation?"

He felt Livia's fingers tighten on his arm.

"Leave it," she whispered, urging him forward.

Saint ignored her and turned around.

“Danny,” he said, locking eyes with the reporter. “First I’ve heard of any investigation.”

“Really? So you’re not worried?”

“No.” Saint smiled at him, and then shared that smile with those members of the crowd, the press in particular, who were listening. “The only thing I’m worried about these days is Pittman resigning with the Bucs.”

Laughter—from everyone except Palmer. The reporter himself didn’t even crack a smile.

“I hear that’s a done deal,” Palmer said.

“Well, I’m glad. That means I can relax and enjoy the evening. And I invite you all—” his gaze took in the crowd again “—to do the same. Especially you, Danny.”

“I’m working,” Palmer said.

Saint shook his head. “All work and no play, Danny. You know what they say.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“Oh, but I do.” Saint took a step forward, and lowered his voice so that only Palmer could hear him. “You know I do, Danny. I worry about you quite a bit, actually.”

He had the satisfaction of seeing the man visibly pale, and struggle for a response. Saint didn’t give him the chance to find one.

With a final wave to the crowd, he turned back to his wife and entered the club.

Saints and Sinners was—as John had so eloquently put it—a multiple-use facility. He’d originally built it intending to rent out the ground floor as a restaurant, and use the second story as a private club for his friends and closest business associates.

They’d barely broken ground on the project, though, when John and Bobby had come to him, suggesting that they open a nightclub in the space instead.

The name—Bobby’s suggestion—had sealed the deal. Saints and Sinners. Howard had loved it from the first.

The ground floor had been split into a half-dozen different rooms, for the differing clienteles that the club attracted. Also Bobby's idea—a club room for the rich twenty-somethings; a cigar lounge for the overachieving young businessmen and women; even a restaurant, with tables, quieter music, a minimal food menu—for Howard Saint's business associates and friends. He and Livia would end up there later this evening, more likely, but for now, they were headed for the club room.

To reach it, though, they had to pass through another throng of well-wishers, crammed together by the coat check. More handshakes and smiles, more small talk. Saint exchanged views about the upcoming city council race with Commissioner Myers; promised Ben Mix, his number two at Saint Motors, ten minutes tomorrow morning; complimented Rebecca Grafton, who did public relations for all his companies, on the dress she was wearing; managed a few quick words with District Attorney LaRue on some outstanding business.

Just as he finished speaking to the DA, he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned.

He found himself face-to-face with Quentin Glass. For the first time all night, a smile of genuine pleasure crossed his face.

"Quentin," he said, clapping the man on the shoulder. "Good crowd tonight. Excellent work."

Glass was Saint's right-hand man—the only one who'd been with him from the very beginning, since Howard Saint had arrived in Tampa almost twenty years ago, determined to make something of himself. Glass had stayed with him every step of the way, through the good times and the bad, helping him do just that. Just as tonight he'd helped gather a cross section of Tampa's key movers and shakers—politicians and businessmen, entertainment figures and sports stars—to be seen here with Howard Saint. It was not officially a fund-raiser—Saint hadn't declared his candidacy

yet—but connections were certainly being made tonight. Valuable connections.

“Thank you, Howard. Believe me, it wasn’t that hard. They all wanted to be here.” Glass leaned closer to his employer and lowered his voice. “Lincoln reports that problem from before has been taken care of, by the way.”

“Ah.” Reston. Saint nodded in satisfaction.

Glass looked over his employer’s shoulder then, and smiled. “Livia. You look extraordinary tonight.”

“Flatterer.” She linked her arm through Saint’s and gestured toward the bar, where the crowd was two and three people deep. “What are the chances of getting something to drink?”

“Considering you own the place . . . excellent. Let’s get you seated first.”

Glass led them to a table in the center of the room and pulled out a chair for Livia. As she sat, people at the bar turned and noticed Saint for the first time. Someone started applauding—a second later, the entire room followed suit. Flashbulbs popped again.

Saint acknowledged the applause with a wave of his hand and sat down himself.

“Twenty years ago these people wouldn’t let me in their homes. Now they’ll elect me governor.”

“They know a good thing when they see it,” Livia said.

A photographer stepped forward. The *Times’s* photographer—Saint scanned the crowd for Palmer but didn’t see him. Just as well—he’d had enough of the man for the evening already.

“Mr. Saint,” the photographer said, “could you . . .”

Saint nodded, turned as the man wanted, and posed. Standing beside his chair, Glass shifted uncomfortably.

“Smile for the newspaper, Quentin. It’s the only thing in Tampa I don’t own.”

“Yet,” Glass said under his breath as the flash went off.

Livia was waving to someone in the crowd as well, but her eyes were darting here and there around the club, searching.

“What is it?” Saint asked.

“Where are the twins?”

“Upstairs, I’m sure,” Glass said.

Saint frowned. He’d hoped the boys would make an appearance with him for the papers tonight—though he understood they were both their own men now, maybe a little concerned about seeming too much their father’s creatures, Bobby in particular. Still . . .

He was about to tell Quentin to ask them to come down when he caught sight of a tall, white-haired man at the bar, engaged in conversation with two striking-looking young women.

Seeing him, Howard Saint smiled, and felt his heart beat just a little bit faster.

The girls he didn’t know—he assumed they were among those who had been hired for this evening—social lubricants, as it were. But the man . . .

The man was Robert Chadwick.

Twice the state’s lieutenant governor, in his prime widely considered the most effective politician in Florida, old Tampa money, old Tampa society, his presence here was the closest thing to a benediction from the powers that were as Howard Saint was likely to get.

Saint caught the man’s eye and smiled. Chadwick raised his glass and held it up in salute.

“Bring him here, would you,” Saint said to Quentin.

Glass, who’d been engaged in quiet conversation with Livia, turned, saw Chadwick, and without uttering a word rose from his chair and went to the bar. He spoke briefly to Chadwick, who smiled regretfully at the two young women and followed Glass back to the table.

“Howard?” Livia asked as they approached.

“Your best smile,” Saint whispered, rising to shake Chadwick’s hand.

“Good to see you, Howard.” Chadwick’s grip was strong, his eyes sharp and piercing. Saint held his hand a second, and let it go.

“Join us?” he asked.

“My pleasure.”

Livia gave Chadwick a dazzling smile—her best smile indeed—as he sat.

And right then, despite what had happened earlier with Reston, and then Palmer, despite the FBI investigation and the boys’ absence . . .

Howard Saint had a feeling, a certainty deep down in his gut: luck was with him tonight.

His conversation with Chadwick was going to go very, very well indeed.

TWO

It had to be some kind of sign.

Ace-king in the hole, ace-king on the flop, and now a third ace on the drop . . .

Full house, and the river still to go.

Tonight was the night his luck changed for good. Bobby Saint was certain of it.

"Hey. Just 'cause the game's called 'hold 'em' doesn't give you call to sit on your ass all night long. Bet's ten to you, Bobby. You in or what?"

Bobby looked up. Sitting in the booth across from him, face barely visible in the dim lighting of Saints and Sinners' upstairs club, T.J.—T. J. Archeletta, the man his father had hired to bodyguard (read: baby-sit) him—fanned his own two hole cards impatiently.

"Come on, boy. I ain't gettin' any younger, you know?"

Which was for damn sure the truth. T.J. was fifty if he was a day. An old cracker his father had brought down from Alachua six months ago just to keep watch over him, the thinking being that anyone closer to Bobby's own age might be tempted to look the other way now and then. Not T.J.

For a crook, he was as straight-arrow as they came.

"Just hold on a minute, old man. I'm thinking."

Thinking about whether or not he should bet heavy now, try to force T.J. out, or play possum for the last card, milk the man for all he was worth. Which wasn't much. Made him wish that Lincoln and Cutter hadn't gotten called away. Those two didn't mind laying out the serious cash.

Though when it came to cash, as he was finding out, serious was a very relative term.

"All right," Bobby said, reaching for the stack of money in front of him. "I'm raising you—" His cell phone rang. Ignoring the glare from T.J., Bobby pulled it off his belt and answered. "Bobby Saint."

"Micky Duka."

Bobby smiled. "What's the word?"

"The word is go. Pick me up in fifteen."

"Done. See you then."

Bobby snapped the phone shut, and looked up to find T.J. staring at him. "What?"

"What's going on, Bobby?"

"I'm raising you, that's what's going on." Bobby pulled a hundred off the pile in front of him and tossed it into the pot. Time to end this quickly and get out of here.

T.J. frowned and tossed his cards in.

Ten bucks, Bobby calculated quickly. Not much of a pot at all.

"That ain't what I'm talkin' about. Who was that on the phone?"

"None of your concern," Bobby said, raking in the pot as neatly as he could. Duka's place was ten minutes away, so he didn't have a lot of time.

"Everythin' you do is my concern, you know that," T.J. said. Which was the gospel truth—Howard Saint had assigned T.J. to watch over Bobby, to stay close, and when Howard Saint said to stay close, he meant arm's length.

Trouble was, Bobby was tired of it. Tired of being treated like a baby, like the bad seed. It wasn't fair. It wasn't like John didn't get into just as many jams as he did, but somehow, his brother always managed to find a way out on his own. Not like Bobby, who'd been singularly unlucky in his brushes with the law. Caught with two underage girls in a motel. Caught buying pot off an undercover cop. Caught trying to put out a hit on that same cop, after the cop dressed him down in front of his father like he was a little kid. Only Howard Saint's connections and a willingness to part with large amounts of cash had kept him out of jail that time.

"So?" T.J. asked again. "You going to let me in on the secret? Or do I have to pull your phone records again?"

Bobby glared at the man.

He was about to tell him to go to hell when a shadow crossed in front of the light. He looked up and saw John staring down at him.

Great. This was all he needed.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," his twin said, looking from Bobby over to T.J., who promptly shook his head.

"I got no plans," T.J. said. "Bobby, though . . . he seems to be in a bit of a hurry."

"Now why am I not surprised about that?" John folded his arms across his chest and smiled. "I heard some idle chitchat about you and a Russian boat."

Shit. How did he know about the boat?

Bobby tried to recover.

"Like you said. It's just idle chitchat. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried. But I think Father would disapprove."

"Father doesn't need to know."

John shook his head. "Do you even understand what's happening tonight, Bobby? What's going to happen over the next few months?"

"Of course I understand. Father's going to run for governor. I'm not stupid, you know."

The second those words were out of his mouth, he wanted them back.

John smirked. That same smirk that Bobby had hated ever since the two of them were boys. The smirk that said *I forgot, you're a little bit slow; let me try to explain it again.*

"No. You're not. So you know that in order to run successfully, he needs our support. He needs us not to do stupid things that could reflect badly on him right now. He needs us—"

"I get the picture," Bobby said, standing. "Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

John sighed.

"I suppose there's no talking you out of this foolishness."
He looked over at T.J. "Go with him."

"Yeah," T.J. said in a long-suffering tone, and struggled to his feet.

Bobby pushed him back down in the booth.

"No. This is my deal."

T.J. glared up at him.

"Don't be stupid, Bobby. This is dangerous," John said.

Bobby let his blazer fall open so his brother could see the 9mm tucked inside his belt.

"Yeah? Well, so am I."

In the car, though, he suddenly didn't feel that way.

Suddenly, he felt nervous. John would go to his father—and then what? Would Bobby have to bow out of the deal? Would Howard Saint even let him get to the boat tonight? He wouldn't put it past his father to send Dante after him, bring him back to the club.

Except that wouldn't happen, Bobby realized. John wouldn't, couldn't rat on him right away—his father was too busy. His brother might indeed tell where Bobby was going, but not till later. Not till after the deal. And after the deal . . .

Bobby would feel a whole lot differently about getting yelled at. For one thing, he'd have the weapons to show his father, to prove he wasn't just blowing smoke about the whole thing. And he'd have the down payment from their first customer—Manuel Ordito's group, right over in Ybor City, whom he and Micky were going to see as soon as they had the weapons stashed. Cuban exiles with an ax to grind and money to burn. As far as Bobby was concerned, they were unbelievably naive—thinking they could smuggle RPGs into Cuba to use on Castro. But hey, as long as they had the money . . .

He relaxed a little, switched on the radio. Queens of the Stone Age—"Go with the Flow." Bobby smiled. Another omen. He felt it again.

Luck was with him tonight.

He cranked up the volume, pulled a roach out of the ashtray, and lit up.

Pot was how he'd met Micky Duka in the first place. Hanging out with him one night in the Cobalt Lounge, after the upstairs at Saints and Sinners had closed, they found out they had a mutual affinity for herb. Before too long, Bobby was buying all his pot from Micky. They started hanging out more and more.

And then Micky told him about this opportunity he'd come across. A chance to make some real money. Thing was, Micky explained, he needed some backing. Some serious cash, as he put it, to lay out up front.

One thing led to another, and before he knew it . . .

Well. Here he was.

And there, on the seat next to him, was the briefcase with the \$60,000 in cash he and Micky needed to make this deal.

And there, standing at the intersection of Guy Verger and Maritime, just where he said he'd be, was Micky Duka himself.

Bobby brought the BMW to a stop and opened the passenger door. Micky climbed in.

"Bobby. My man."

The two shook. Micky was a slightly built, short man with slicked-back hair and small, beady eyes. He looked shifty—like the con artist he was. Looked nothing like his father, Mike Duka, a tank of a man who'd been a longtime fixture on the Tampa crime scene, an enforcer whom Bobby had seen in old pictures with his dad, back in the day.

Micky patted the briefcase on the seat between them.

"This is it, right? The sixty large?"

"That's it."

"Beautiful. We are making history tonight, Bobby. A whole new chapter in the book about the Dukas and Saints, right? I mean our families, we go way back together, but this is—"

"Enough," Bobby interrupted. "Let's stay focused."

“Right.” Micky drummed his hands on his thighs. “Focused. We’ll take it easy. Let me get a hit off that, Bobby?”

“Yeah.” He passed Micky the roach. He wished the man would calm down, would shut up already about their family’s shared history. One thing Micky always neglected to mention when he talked about that history: the elder Duka had died in Howard Saint’s service.

That was not something Bobby liked to dwell on.

“Easy man. Here it is,” Micky said. “Slow down.”

Bobby looked up, saw the sign—TAMPA BAY TRANS-NATIONAL TERMINAL—and turned into the drive. Micky gave the guard at the gate a thumbs-up—they’d already bought him off, another grand out of his pocket, but that was small change compared to what they were expecting to clear on this deal—then they parked the BMW by the dockmaster’s shack, and climbed out.

“There it is,” Micky said. “What’d I tell you? There it is.”

He was pointing toward a huge, rusted hulk of a cargo ship berthed at the pier closest to them. Russian letters were stenciled in barely visible gray along the side of the ship.

“Better let me take that,” Micky said, holding his hand out for the briefcase.

After a second’s hesitation—they’d talked about this already, Micky knew these people, he’d set up the deal, so he had to make the exchange—Bobby passed it over.

They started walking toward the ship.

“Just hang back and let me do the talking, right?” Micky said.

“You got it. I’m just here to watch, don’t worry.” They’d talked about this, too—Micky had even suggested Bobby let him make the exchange on his own, but no way that was happening. Howard Saint hadn’t raised any fools in his household.

“So this Astrov guy,” Bobby began. “He’s promising a three-to-one return on the money?”

“He says that’s the least we can expect. The market is volatile, that’s what he told me, but if we find the right customer, for the Kornets maybe—he says we can maybe do ten-to-one.”

Bobby nodded. That jibed with the research he’d done, too. The RPGs—the grenade launchers they were selling to Ordito—they were getting three-to-one for them, but the Kornets—antitank weapons—those could turn a much heftier profit. More than enough to get him out on his own, make him a player—Bobby Saint, international arms dealer. Private jet, villa in the South of France, swimming pool stocked with the requisite babes . . .

He stepped from the gangway onto the metal pier itself. The sound of his footsteps echoed into the distance, and disappeared. He smelled the ocean, heard the slap of the waves against the ship, the sound of traffic in the distance. The pier itself, though, was silent and dark. So was the ship. Bobby frowned.

“So where is this guy?”

“Don’t worry, he’s here, Bobby.” Micky turned and gave him what he no doubt intended to be a reassuring smile. “He’s the real deal. I met him in a hash bar in Amsterdam. Speaks Russian, German, Arabic . . . he’s got five Picassos. They’re all stolen, so he can’t show them, but that’s five more than I got.”

Bobby shook his head. “Was that supposed to be funny?”

Micky opened his mouth to respond—

All at once a spotlight flicked on above them.

The light, fixed high above on a huge smokestack, illuminated a stack of cargo containers—each the size of a small car—piled two and three high on the deck of the Russian ship.

Hanging nonchalantly to the edge of one of those carts, a man peered down at them with what Bobby could only think

of as disdain.

"That's Krieg," Micky said. "Astrov's right hand." He waved and took a step forward. "Otto!"

Machinery whirred to life. The crate Krieg was standing on rose off the deck—Bobby traced steel cables back from it to a crane near the pilot house—and lowered toward the pier.

Bobby took a closer look at Krieg.

He wore a tan sport coat, a blue open-neck shirt. A cigarette dangled loosely from his mouth. Eurotrash, was Bobby's first thought. He saw a hundred like this pass through Saints and Sinners every month—drugged-out, bored, looking for kicks anyway they could get them.

And then he saw Krieg's eyes.

They were pitch black and focused on Bobby with needle-like precision. With obvious displeasure.

And all at once, that feeling of nervousness was back.

Krieg motioned to the pilothouse. The container stopped moving, a foot off the surface of the dock.

"Mr. Astrov's trust is not gained easily," the man said in heavily accented English. "Two years, it took me. He doesn't like new faces. So tell me, Micky—" Krieg raised a hand and pointed straight at Bobby. "—why am I looking at a new face?"

Micky attempted a smile.

"Otto Krieg, meet my friend Bobby. He's helping me with the financing."

Krieg continued to glare.

Bobby nodded at the man, tried to look relaxed, unconcerned, as if he did this sort of thing every day. "Yo," he said.

Krieg glared even harder. "Yo? Yo? Did they teach you to say 'yo' at the police academy? Bad vibe. Bye-bye."

Krieg turned to the pilothouse again.

In a second, Bobby knew, the crate would start to rise once more, and everything he wanted—the jet, the villa, the girls, his freedom—would go with it.

"You got it wrong. Mr. Krieg. I'm not a cop." He turned to Micky. "Tell him."

"Mr. Krieg," Micky began.

"Ah." Krieg raised a hand. "You understand the position you've put me in here, Micky? Don't you?"

Duka's head bobbed up and down like a little doll's. "Sure. Sure I do. Bobby—" Duka turned to face Bobby now.

"—see things from his perspective. He didn't expect you here. Otto . . . Mr. Krieg . . . this is my friend. Not a cop."

Krieg stared from one of them to the other, then climbed down onto the deck.

"You say that, but I don't know that."

He walked right up to Bobby, till they were practically nose to nose, inches apart, and just stared at him. His eyes cold, dispassionate, as if he couldn't care less whether or not the deal went down.

Bobby stared right back.

Krieg took a drag of his cigarette, blew smoke out to the side, and then nodded.

"All right. You vouch for him; I'll take your word."

Micky let out a sigh of relief.

"You won't regret it, Mr. Krieg," Duka said. "Bobby here is connected, big-time, and—"

Bobby was about to tell Duka to shut up, he didn't want to advertise who he was to these clowns, they'd probably hit him up for more money, but then he saw there was no need. Krieg wasn't listening to Micky anyway. The German had already turned back to the boat, was motioning to the pilothouse. Machinery whirled again, and the crate clanged down on the deck.

And at that moment, the door to the pilothouse opened, and four men stepped out. Three in muscle T-shirts, goons who made Dante and Lincoln—who both ate nothing but protein shakes and eggs and went to the gym twice a day to stay cut—look like malnourished chickens.

The fourth was—Bobby knew without being told—Yuri Astrov. An older man, mid-fifties say, unshaven, unwashed, entirely unremarkable, in fact, except for the laserlike eyes he directed first at Duka, and then at Bobby.

Astrov exchanged a look with Krieg, then started forward with his men, heading toward the dock.

“Let’s see the money,” Krieg said.

Micky snapped open the briefcase. Krieg slipped on a pair of wire-framed glasses; from his pocket he drew out what looked like a long thin flashlight. He flicked it on.

A purple beam—ultraviolet light—shot from the end of the device. Krieg picked a stack from out of the briefcase at random and ran the wand over it, checking to make sure the bills weren’t counterfeit.

Heavy footsteps sounded. Astrov and his bodyguards approaching.

Krieg looked up at the newcomers, and a thin smile crossed his face. He said something to Astrov.

Bobby couldn’t make heads or tails of it. It sounded like Russian, he thought, and was about to ask for a translation when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Micky.

“Relax. Krieg told him you were okay, and so is the money.”

Astrov’s bodyguards stepped forward. They flipped open a series of latches on the cargo container and slid one of the side panels off. The container was full of wooden crates—Astrov’s men dragged them out on the dock and opened each in turn.

Bobby and Micky paraded past, studying the contents.

“Oh, man,” Micky said. “It’s all here.”

Bobby nodded. It was indeed all here, just as promised. AK-47s. RPGs. And the Kornets. Six of them.

“We have deal?” Astrov asked in heavily accented English of his own.

Micky smiled. “Oh, yeah. We have deal.”

He held up his hand to give Astrov a high five. The man frowned and, instead, took the briefcase out of Micky's hands. Then he smiled.

And at that second, the dock was flooded with light. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time, from all around them.

Bobby blinked. His eyes found Micky's, and he saw sheer terror there.

His heart thudded in his chest.

"This is the FBI!" a voice sounded. "Do not move. Put your hands in the air!"

15 June 2200 Hours

Last thoughts. Clear my head. Stay focused, think about the op dispassionately. The setup, the endgame. Astrov, caught like a deer in the headlights.

Think about the look on his face when he realizes there's no escape, no amount of money he can proffer to get out of this one. No judge is going to grant him bail. After tonight, he'll spend the rest of his life in prison.

That's the goal here. That's what I need to keep in mind. Astrov, in cuffs.

Not Donna.

Do not think about her-Agent Zebrowski-and what he did to her.

Do not think about Ferropolis.

Do not consider revenge.

Remember the law.

Weeks and I talked about this. He hinted that if Ares went down wrong, if something happened to Astrov, it wouldn't be the end of the world. I told him no.

"That's unacceptable," I said. "We play by the rules, Jimmy. You know that. That's what separates us from them."

"I'll keep it in mind, Frank," he said.

Which is just what I need to do now. Stay focused. Remain dispassionate. Detached.

Remember the law.

[Entry Ends.]

THREE

His name was Otto Krieg.

And Otto Krieg was in a world of trouble.

"What is this?" Micky Duka shouted, looking around the dock wildly. "What's going on? Otto?"

Duka's eyes met Krieg's. Otto reached into his belt and drew a gun.

"You brought a cop, Micky," he said. "And he brought his friends!"

"Don't look at me!" Duka shouted. "I swear, we didn't—"

"Shut up," Krieg said, and turned.

Astrov's men had formed a protective circle around Yuri, and were backing away from the unloaded crates, back toward the gangway leading to the ship. Krieg's eyes found Astrov's, and the two men exchanged a look of understanding.

Otto knew exactly what his boss was thinking. Stay calm. Don't panic. That's our only chance.

Good advice, Krieg thought.

This Bobby whom Duka had brought, though . . .

He wasn't listening.

"This is not good," the young man said, shaking his head. "My father's going to kill me."

Krieg frowned. He didn't understand.

"Your father? Who is your father?"

The man ignored him, continued to look around in fear. He had reason to be concerned, of course; the pier was filling with law enforcement personnel.

FBI, local police, SWAT teams in full body armor—it was hard for Krieg to tell who was who, there were so many of them.

His eyes fastened on a man in a suit at the head of one group—a black man, in a SWAT team helmet, carrying a megaphone.

The man's eyes, in turn, fastened on him.

"You are under arrest for the importation and sale of contraband firearms," the man said, continuing to move forward. "Drop the gun."

Krieg considered the situation a moment. Astrov and his bodyguards had stopped moving, halfway to the gangplank. Duka had stopped, too, had his hands high up in the air, rooted to the spot.

Bobby, though, was still looking around frantically, searching for a way out.

The fool didn't understand yet that there was none.

"Drop the gun," repeated the man advancing on Krieg. "I won't say it again."

Otto shook his head, his eyes still fastened on Bobby.

In the countless number of times he'd played this scene out in his mind, it had never gone quite this way. He'd arranged this deal between Astrov and Duka, thought he'd calculated every possible way it could unfold, but the presence of this man, this Bobby-whomever whom Duka had brought to help finance his deal . . . it was like a joker turning up in a game of straight five-card draw. It threw everything off.

But there was nothing he could do about it now, other than play the cards as they'd been dealt.

Krieg turned suddenly on the agent with the megaphone, raised his gun, and took aim. For a split second, he had the drop on the man. Had a clear shot.

But, somehow, it was the other who fired first.

The bullet struck Krieg square in the chest. It felt like getting hit with a battering ram—he staggered backward, and swayed on his feet. The pain was incredible.

"Otto!" Duka shouted.

Krieg toppled to the dock. His head hit metal—hard— and his vision swam.

He looked up at the night sky, and saw blinking lights. A plane flying high above.

He looked down toward his chest, toward the pain, and saw red. A stain on his shirt that spread as he watched.

He looked up, and his eyes found Micky Duka's.

And just beyond Micky, he saw Bobby's hand reach into his belt, saw the glint of metal there—a gun, why had the man brought a gun?—and he knew the joker was wild, wilder than he had thought possible, and that everything was about to go horribly wrong.

He searched for his voice and managed only a croak.

"Drop the gun!" the man who'd shot him yelled, now turning on Bobby, his weapon still raised. "DROP THE GUN."

Bobby wasn't listening.

"This wasn't my deal," Krieg heard Bobby say, his voice sounding very far away, distorted somehow, almost as if it were coming from underwater. "I don't even know these people."

Bobby's movements matched his voice—herky-jerky, awkward. Unpredictable. The worst possible thing to be in the middle of this kind of standoff, where the slightest wrong move could trigger unimaginable violence.

And then it happened.

By the gangplank, one of Astrov's guards, maybe reacting to a movement of Bobby's, or a sudden shift in position by the SWAT team, drew his weapon, uttered a curse, and fired.

The response was immediate and overwhelming.

Gunfire blazed across the dock, sounding like string after string of firecrackers going off.

The bodyguard who'd drawn his weapon jerked in the air like a marionette, then went down. A second later, so did Astrov, and then another bodyguard, who managed to draw his weapon and fire as he fell.

Bullets flew everywhere, ricocheting off the dock, splashing in the water, bouncing off the hull of the cargo ship. Micky Duka dove to the ground and covered his head with his hands.

Duka's friend Bobby, though, stood stock-still in the middle of the pandemonium he'd created, then a split second later was caught in the cross fire.

He danced for a moment in the spotlight, spraying crimson everywhere.

No, Krieg thought. No.

"Bobby!" he heard Duka scream. For a moment, the sound echoed.

And then there was silence.

Time slowed. He was vaguely aware of sound, and movement, and pain, above all pain in his chest where the bullet had hit him. An ambulance siren. Duka whimpering.

Two men in white uniforms—EMTs hovering over him—pressing something to his chest, then shaking their heads.

"He's done," someone said. "I'm calling it. One thirty-seven A.M."

Krieg tried to move and found he couldn't. He felt his legs being lifted, then his arms, and the sensation of something plastic against his skin. A body bag, he realized.

Was this what it felt like to die?

The zipper closed over him, and everything went black. He felt movement, as if he were being carried down a long dark tunnel. And in the darkness, his mind continued to race.

The first thing he thought was this: Yuri Astrov was done, as was the arms-trafficking organization he ran, the organization for which Krieg had spent the last two years of his life working. No one would emerge from the ranks to take Astrov's place, because no one else had the personal connections to so many of the old Kremlin higher-ups.

The second thing that came to mind was an image. The image of Duka's friend Bobby, standing frozen on the dock as the bullets struck him.

Could Krieg have prevented the boy's death? He tried to gather his thoughts, analyze his actions and reactions back on the pier, but soon he realized that what he was feeling

had more to do with emotion than objective truth. Guilt. And this was no time for guilt; he would have to wait until later, when he was away from the theater of battle, to examine Bobby's death again.

For now, he had to maintain his focus.

Because eventful as the night had been so far, it was a long, long way from being over.

The vehicle he was riding in came to a sudden stop. Doors opened and slammed shut, shoes pounded on concrete, doors opened again.

Light—bright, harsh, omnipresent—flooded in on him.

Otto Krieg—aka FBI special agent Frank Castle, ex-Marine, ex-Delta Force, and soon to be ex-agency as well— sat up, his legs still inside the body bag, and blinked.

His immediate superior, Jimmy Weeks—sans SWAT team helmet, sans the gun he'd "fired" on Castle/Krieg only minutes before—stood over him, concern etched on his face.

"You all right?"

Castle managed a nod.

"The part of the job you never get used to. Gimme a hand, Jimmy."

Weeks did, steadying the gurney so Frank could climb the rest of the way out of the body bag and get to his feet.

"Well, 'Otto'—thank God I don't have to listen to that terrible German accent of yours anymore."

"You wouldn't know a good German accent if it bit you on your frankfurter," Castle shot back, peeling off his stained shirt. Underneath, the squibs that had exploded when Weeks 'shot' him hung loosely from an ultrathin nylon filament— Weeks tugged on the filament to pull it off, and the wire cut into Castle's shoulder.

"Hey. Take it easy."

"Hurry up. We gotta get you out of here."

"Here" was the staging garage they'd called home for the last six months, since the decision had been made to shift

operational HQ for Ares down to Tampa. A garage, ironically enough, located just a few minutes away from Tampa Transnational Pier, where Astrov's freighter had docked, where even now local PD were scrambling to clean up a mess that no one would want to have to explain in the morning.

At least Weeks and his team had made it easier for the authorities by removing the bodies, Castle saw. Five body bags lay on gurneys next to the one he'd just risen from.

"Frank . . ." Weeks prompted again. "Come on."

"Hold on a second." He had a flight to catch, a chopper would be here for him any minute, but there was a little time, at least. Castle went to the nearest body bag and unzipped it.

Yuri Astrov, his face frozen in a rictus of surprise, stared up at him. Castle stared back, remembering the hundreds of hours he'd spent in the Russian's service, and all at once he realized that the man had died thinking the two of them were friends, that the oblivion death had brought to him had also spared Astrov the sting of betrayal, the pain of learning that the man he'd considered his right hand was in fact his bitterest enemy.

Death, too, had spared him the sting of a lifetime in prison, a lifetime of long, cold, desolate nights and empty days, a lifetime to reflect on his crimes and the pain he had caused, pain Castle had planned to remind him of by visiting Astrov as often as possible.

Castle shook his head. "What the hell happened back there, Jimmy? Who was that kid that Duka brought?"

"Don't know. Definitely not in the plan. We'll deal with it, though—not to worry." Weeks clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on—no long faces. You did good work back there. Good work for the last two years. We beat the spread, Frank."

"This isn't football."

"Figure of speech."

"People weren't supposed to die out there."

“People are never supposed to die.”

Castle could only nod. One of the EMTs moved in between him and Astrov’s body then, and zipped the bag the rest of the way open.

“Forget this one—we know who he is,” Frank said. “Let’s get the others ID’d, and get ’em to the morgue.”

The EMT looked past him to Weeks.

“We’ll handle it, Frank,” Jimmy said. “Now, come on. Sandoval’s waiting.”

Castle’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Waiting? You mean he’s here?”

“Not here,” Weeks snapped. “He’s going to fly back to Washington with you—do the debriefing himself, on the plane.”

“You sure about that?” It didn’t make any sense—why would the deputy director want to debrief him personally, in the middle of the night? Why wouldn’t he wait for Weeks, who was AIC on the op, who hadn’t been half unconscious when gunfire erupted, to file his reports?

“Those were the orders I got,” Jimmy said. “Believe me, I wouldn’t be rushing around like this without a damn good reason.”

With a final nod to the EMTs, Weeks exited the staging area. Castle was a step behind him.

“I guess we’re not going to be able to grab that beer then,” he said.

“No.” Weeks shook his head. “I guess not.”

Frank searched for words, for what he wanted to say next.

He’d known Jimmy Weeks for more than a decade now, since they’d served together in Desert Shield. After the mess with Lanauer in Bosnia, it had been Weeks, already a bureau veteran, who’d helped Frank make the decision to leave Delta Force and come over to the FBI. The two of them had stayed close, despite working in different parts of the country, until fate—and Ares—had brought them together again here in Tampa.

That close association was about to end, though.

Because Castle was leaving Tampa tonight, and the country itself a few days after that. A new assignment—a desk assignment—in London. He'd hoped to have a chance to say good-bye to Jimmy—in more than a few words—before flying back to his family this evening.

Now it looked as if those few words were going to have to do.

"Hey, Jim," he said. "Hold up a minute."

Weeks kept on walking.

"Jimmy, listen up, will you? There's something I want to say."

Weeks turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

Castle frowned after him. What, had the man suddenly gone deaf? He quickened his own pace, turned the corner . .

And walked, all at once, into a sea of familiar, smiling faces.

Fleury and Carter from the Tampa field office, Clark and Shannon of Task Force C, virtually everyone on Ares support, and Weeks himself, grinning like a pig who had just stepped in shit.

"What—" was all he had time to say before everyone reared back and yelled at the top of their lungs:

"Surprise!"

Castle blinked, and looked up. A banner hung on the wall just in front of him: HAPPY RETIREMENT, FRANK.

For the second time that night, and for an entirely different reason, Castle had trouble finding his voice.

"A surprise party," he said dully.

"Yeah. A surprise party. You didn't really think Sandoval was going to leave Quantico just to talk to you, did you?" Weeks shook his head. "You've been out of touch with reality too long, Frank."

Castle could only smile at that. It was true. He'd been out of touch with reality—with real life—for way too long.

Which was, after all, the reason he was giving up this part of the job.

Someone pressed a glass of champagne into his hand. Well-wishers congregated around him, slapped him on the back, told him how much they appreciated working with him, how much he would be missed. The change in mood—from the gunfight on the dock to this celebration—was jarring. Too much for him to handle, really. He could only manage monosyllabic answers to everyone's questions; after a while, he fell silent entirely.

Weeks caught his eye and saw his discomfort. His friend tapped on a glass for quiet.

"Don't take it personally, folks—but this is going to be the shortest going-away party in history. Our friend Frank Castle here—" Weeks gestured, and the assembled agents broke into a spontaneous round of applause "—he says he's retiring on account of his wife and child, and having lost mine to this damn job, I'm not going to argue."

Jimmy raised his glass.

"To Frank Castle—the finest soldier, finest undercover op, and finest man I've ever known. What am I gonna do without you?"

"Get a girlfriend," Castle shot back, smiling.

But even as the assembled agents broke into applause, his eyes sought out Jimmy's, and he gave him, with a look, what he couldn't bring himself to say in words. His appreciation, his thanks.

Weeks moved forward then, and the two men clasped forearms.

"You say hi to Maria, and Will. You tell them I'll get to London as soon as I can."

"I'll do that. Jimmy—"

"And have fun in Puerto Rico, Frank. Say hello to your folks."

"I will. You know the invitation is still there—if you can get away . . ."

“Don’t think it’s gonna happen, buddy. Not this time.”

“These things don’t happen that often, Jim. Try and make it.”

Weeks gave him a wan smile. They were talking about the Castle/Castiglione/McCarey reunion, which was less than a week away. Forty-odd members of Frank’s extended family, who were jetting down to his parents’ Puerto Rico vacation compound for several days of fun in the sun.

“Anyway,” Weeks said, “in lieu of my presence at your getaway, I got you a little something to remember me by.”

“What?”

Weeks held up his right arm.

“Thirteen years ago,” he said. “You gave me this.”

Weeks pointed to the military-issue Rolex he wore—top of the line, stainless steel, diamond-and-gold-inset clock face.

Back in 1991, it had taken half of Frank’s savings to purchase.

“Small payment for saving my life,” he said.

Weeks shrugged. “Ah, hell. That Iraqi would have missed.”

“He was three feet away.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s so.” Weeks smiled. “Here.”

For a second, Castle thought he had taken the Rolex off his arm and was offering it to him. He started to shake his head.

And then he realized that Jimmy had, somehow, found the watch’s twin.

For the third time that night, Castle was speechless.

And for the first time in a long while, an honest-to-goodness smile, an expression of genuine pleasure, crossed his face.

“I thought they weren’t making this model anymore,” he said.

“They’re not. Believe me, it took quite a while to track down.”

“Jimmy.” Castle shook his head. “You shouldn’t have.”

He really shouldn't have, Frank suddenly realized, because as big a dent in his savings as that watch had put thirteen years ago, it had to have put an even bigger cramp in what little free cash Weeks had to his name. Not only did Jimmy have alimony, child support, and his own living expenses to take care of, but he'd apparently picked up a nasty habit that Frank had only recently heard about—an affinity for the casinos that, according to agency scuttlebutt, had taken a sizable bite out of his savings. Castle had been meaning to talk to him about it for some time now, see if he could help his friend through the problem, but being undercover twenty-four/seven hardly lent itself to long, soul-baring chats with law enforcement personnel.

Weeks shrugged.

"I would've sprung for the matching radio wristwatches, but I figured we'll be able to talk on the agency's dime once you're settled in at the London desk."

"You know we will," Frank said. "We're not going to lose touch, Jimmy."

Outside of the staging area, he suddenly heard the whir of an approaching chopper. His chopper. Transport out to Tampa International, where he'd hop a charter back to Arlington, and home. Maria and Will. It was almost too much to believe.

A man suddenly appeared at Weeks's shoulder. Frank took a second to place him—one of the EMTs from the staging area, now out of his ambulance uniform and back in civilian clothes.

"Special Agent Weeks?" he said, and held out a wallet to Jimmy. Weeks took it and flipped it open.

His face fell.

"Shit."

"What?" Frank asked.

Jimmy just shook his head. Castle looked to the newly arrived agent.

"That kid Duka brought," the man said. "It was Bobby Saint. Howard Saint's son."

"Shit is right," Frank chimed in; at that same instant, he flashed on the very last words Bobby had spoken to him, back on the pier— *My father's going to kill me*—and thought: Well . . . you don't have to worry about that anymore, kid.

Though once Howard Saint heard the news about his son, there was indeed going to be trouble.

"Jim," he said, turning to Weeks. "Maybe I should—" But his friend was already shaking his head. "Go. It's nothing we can't handle."

"You sure? I don't have to be back for a couple days yet. I can—"

Weeks stepped forward and flung open the door to the landing pad outside. The whirr of the copter's blades was deafening.

"Go home, Frank," he said. "We'll be fine."

Castle hesitated a moment, then at last nodded and took a step toward the door.

He paused at the threshold and looked Weeks straight in the eye.

"Do me a favor, Jimmy. Stay out of the casinos."

His friend gave him that same wan smile in response. "What, me?"

"Yes, you. You take care of yourself."

"Don't worry Frank. It's all good."

But as Castle climbed into the waiting helicopter, as it rose into the night sky and the lights of Tampa flew past beneath him, he had a sudden premonition, a flash of concern for his friend Jimmy Weeks and for the other agents he was leaving behind. A feeling that the file on Ares wasn't closed just yet, that there were still repercussions to come from what had happened tonight.

And at that moment, he was very glad indeed to be putting this place—and everyone associated with it—far

behind him.

FOUR

Howard Saint held his sobbing wife gently in his arms, let her rest her head on his shoulder. With one hand, he gently stroked her hair. With the other, he held Livia tightly to him, to prevent her from collapsing a second time.

“Shhhh,” he whispered in her ear.

Behind her, his son John stood impassively, whatever grief he was feeling tucked away someplace deep inside him. In that respect, he was just like his father—Howard Saint had never let his boys see him weak, or scared, or full of self-doubt, and he was not about to start now. He’d learned his lesson young—in this world, only the strong survived. John had picked up that knowledge from him long ago.

Poor Bobby never had.

Behind John, Quentin Glass stood, his own face a mask set in stone, one foot on the rear veranda, one foot in the mansion proper. As always, the perfect soldier, waiting to execute Howard Saint’s orders, whatever they were. And behind him, Saint saw Dante and Lincoln, Cutter and Spoon, and T.J., all waiting for his commands as well.

How had tonight come to this?

Up until a minute ago, it had been the perfect evening. His talk with Chadwick at Saints and Sinners had been everything he could have wanted, and more. The party was prepared to throw its full weight behind him, to make him their candidate in the upcoming primary, and in the general election beyond that, in exchange for his support on a single issue. A promise to kill the Everglades Reclamation Project.

Saint had asked for a copy of their position to be faxed over to his downtown offices tomorrow morning so he could study the problem, but really, what was there to think about? What did he care about a bunch of fucking alligators? Chadwick knew it, and so did he. They talked in supposed hypotheticals for another half hour—when and

where to announce, campaign personnel, basic issue strategy—but both men knew that this was the first of many meetings they would be having, en route to the governor's mansion next January.

He and Livia had returned here, to his estate on the Tampa waterfront, to celebrate. Which they'd only just begun to do—a drink on the veranda, a passionate kiss, the promise of a more passionate evening to come—when Howard Saint had heard the front door open, and had looked up to see John and Quentin heading straight for them.

And with the news they'd brought, everything else seemed suddenly, and perhaps permanently, insignificant.

His son was dead.

And no matter how much of the fault for that death could rightfully be laid at Bobby Saint's own feet, that was beside the point, for the moment. The only thing that mattered now was finding out what exactly had happened to queer this arms deal his boy had gone in on, and why.

Making sure that somebody paid for Bobby's life in equal coin. Their blood, for his. John had supplied a lead. That was where they would start.

Howard Saint told his son—his sole remaining son— where to begin. He saw John relay his instructions to Quentin, and then the two left together.

He turned back to Livia then and, as gently as he could, helped her find her feet.

"Let's get you upstairs," he said.

She nodded wordlessly. He put an arm around her waist and guided her to their bedroom. She would need drugs to sleep, he knew that for a fact. She would need them more than once during the night.

He, however, would not. Howard Saint was not intending to sleep. Not that night, certainly. Perhaps not for some time yet to come.

There was work to be done.

It was what you might call puzzling, Micky thought. His current status. The fact that not much more than three hours after he'd been in the middle of a shoot-out between some international arms-dealing wackos and the Federales, Micky Duka was standing on the curb outside the downtown Tampa lockup, a free man.

He looked around and shook his head.

"Hey—who took care of the bail?"

There was, unsurprisingly, no response.

"Geez." He smiled to himself and shook his head again. This was one helluva night.

He thought back to what had happened after the Feds—that was who Micky assumed they were; Christ, with those haircuts and those 1970s suits, who the hell else could they be?—had marched him right off the dock and into a waiting paddy wagon, jawing in his ear ninety miles an hour about how he was a threat to national security, and they were gonna lock him up for the rest of his natural-born days, unless of course he told them absolutely everything he knew about Astrof, Otto, and what had just gone down on the pier.

Morons. What did they think, he was born yesterday?

"I ain't sayin' squat," Micky had promptly informed them. "Until whereupon such time as my lawyer is contacted and a deal is procured."

Fed No. 1 had tried to tell him that there wasn't going to be any deal, that they had no need to make any kind of deal, given that the target of their investigation—Astrov—was already taken care of, that Micky's only chance at avoiding a long, long, long stretch in prison was to be 100 percent cooperative right now, this instant.

Micky knew he was bluffing, of course, so he'd just sat back on the bench in the rear of said paddy wagon and waited for Fed No. 1 to make his offer.

Somewhat to his surprise, that offer had not been forthcoming.

Instead, Fed No. 1 had simply shrugged and sat back in his own seat. Hadn't even turned around when the paddy wagon stopped right in front of this very lockup, the back doors swung open, and two of Tampa's finest began marching him toward the prison entrance.

"Hey!" Micky had called out, trying to get the Fed's attention. "You know I know things. You want to know what I know, you know what you gotta do!"

Instead of responding, the man had simply motioned to the driver, and the paddy wagon had pulled away.

Fine, Micky had thought. So that was how they were gonna play it. Let him stew awhile. That was all right. He'd been in the system before; he knew how to do time.

So he wasn't surprised when, after an hour or so of sitting in his dark cell, he'd heard footsteps. He'd looked up, expecting to see Fed No. 1 with the paperwork to get a deal started.

But instead, he saw a beer-bellied old prison guard standing at the control panel next to his cell.

"What's goin' on?" Micky had asked.

"Somebody posted your bail," the guard responded, and opened his door.

The question, of course, was who.

One of his old man's buddies? They liked to look after him, liked to pretend that Micky was still little Mikey Duka, tagging along after Daddy. Or maybe . . .

Could it have been his mom? That would not be good. She'd whip his ass seven ways to Sunday if she found out he was back walking the wrong side of the tracks. Except . . .

If it had been his mom, she'd have met him right outside the cell and let him have it then and there. So . . . not his mom. Then who?

Micky looked up and down the street again. Still no one.

Oh, well. He'd find out sooner or later when they came around looking for the bail money. In the meantime . . .

He had things to do. Number one on the list was to call Bobby's family and let them know what had happened. The second thing was to get hold of his parole officer and put the right slant on the evening's events. And the third . . .

He was hungry. Actually, maybe that should be first. There was a greasy spoon a couple blocks down that—

He heard the sound of an engine. Micky spun and saw a dark sedan round the corner, heading straight for him. Not good. A car like that, out this time of the morning . . .

He walked a little faster. That would be ironic, right? Survive a shoot-out with AK-47s and get mugged outside the police station? Why did these things seem to happen only to him?

The sedan pulled up right alongside him and slowed. Micky tensed. The glass was tinted—he couldn't see in at all. His heart began to beat faster. He wished he was better with his fists—he was tired of getting hit on all the time, getting the crap pounded out of him. His cousin Joey was always on him to take karate, and that's just what he was going to do, starting next week, only—

The sedan moved past him then, and Micky let out a long, slow breath of relief.

You got a hyperactive imagination, Duka, he told himself.

At which point, the sedan came to a sudden halt, and the doors opened.

Bobby Saint's personal bodyguard, T.J., and two other men—bouncer types whom he'd seen at the club more than once—stepped out.

Micky took one look at their faces and suddenly realized who it was who'd bailed him out.

Howard Saint.

"T.J.," he said, spreading his arms wide to show that he wasn't packing, that he was no threat. "I was looking to call you, man. You heard what happened?"

T.J. nodded slowly. "Oh, yeah. We heard."

"I can't believe it," Micky said. "I never thought—"

“No,” T.J. said. “You didn’t think at all, did you?”

Those were the last words that were exchanged for quite some time.

In between punches, Micky tried to reason with the three men. It wasn’t his fault; his ass had been on the line, too; they could see that, couldn’t they?

Unfortunately, no such admission was forthcoming.

T.J. and his buddies manhandled him into the car. They sat him in the back, then manhandled him a little more. They stopped manhandling him long enough to march him up to the second story of Saints and Sinners, at which point they began manhandling him again.

When the beating finally stopped, Micky looked up to find that at some point during his ordeal, another man had entered the room.

The lights were down low. He had to squint to make out features—not Howard Saint, not one of the Verducci brothers, though this guy had a goatee, too, and was—

The man took a step forward, into the light, and Micky’s blood ran cold.

The newcomer was Quentin Glass.

If Micky hadn’t realized before how much trouble he was in, he knew it now for a fact. Glass was Howard Saint’s right hand—his knife hand, some people said. He did the dirty work. He enjoyed the dirty work, according to those same people. Enjoyed it as in enjoyed seeing people suffer.

Glass knelt down next to Micky and shook his head.

“You sell homegrown pot by the ounce, Micky, not by the barrel. You sell badly forged fake passports to Haitians. What inspired you to become the Mr. Universe of International Arms Dealers?”

Duka tried to gather his thoughts. He found he had only one at the moment: I don’t want to die.

“Micky?”

“I was infected by the virus of greed, Mr. Glass, but I’m learning my lesson. I swear I am.”

“Micky? You should apologize for the death of Mr. Saint’s youngest child.”

“Yeah. Okay.” He tried to explain. “Okay, I know how it looks, but Bobby, he buys pot from me, and when he found out what I was doing, he insisted on coming in. He put up half the cash! Came of his own free will!”

Glass’s face remained a stone mask, his eyes unreadable.

Micky was starting to sweat.

“If you’re going to kill me, would you leave my face alone—for my mother?”

Glass shook his head and stood up then. He motioned T.J. and the other two men forward.

The beating began again, much worse this time. Micky realized that they must have been holding back before. Or maybe he’d just had enough.

“Please,” he croaked. “Please—”

Someone grabbed his hair and lifted his head up off the floor. Glass again.

“We just made your bail,” he said, his voice icy calm. “If I’d wanted to kill you, I would have left you in jail where we have friends, and in some way that I can only describe as deeply pornographic, you would have been killed. But you’re a small piece of shit, and I don’t want the karma of your murder on my soul.”

Glass let go of the hair. Micky’s head hit the ground again—hard—but he didn’t care about that. Had he just heard right? Glass wasn’t going to kill him?

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Glass,” he sputtered. “Thank you I—”

Glass held a cigarette in one hand. He raised the other to stop Micky from talking.

“Shhh,” he said.

Micky shhh’d.

Glass lit his cigarette. Took a long, slow drag off it, then frowned.

“On the other hand, maybe I don’t believe in karma. In which case . . .”

Glass turned back to T.J. The big man smiled thinly, and smacked his fist into his palm.

“Guys?”

The three men started forward again.

“No,” Micky blurted out. “I’ll tell you anything you want.”

“Then this’ll be quick. I want to know one thing only. Who brokered the deal?”

“His name was Otto Krieg. And if it’s any comfort to Mr. Saint, he’s dead, too.”

Glass nodded.

“Good. Thank you, Micky.”

Duka let out a sigh of relief . . . and then noticed, for the first time, the door on the far wall, opposite the one he’d been brought through. It stood slightly ajar. Through it, he glimpsed a window, and through that, the Tampa skyline.

Silhouetted in the door frame, he saw the shadow of a man. The shadow stepped forward and spoke.

“Yes, thank you. But I’m afraid that it’s no comfort, Micky. No comfort at all.”

Micky looked up and met Howard Saint’s eyes—and realized that his troubles, far from being over, were just beginning.

FIVE

Cushioned leather seats. Single-malt scotch. Breakfast cooked to order . . .

Frank Castle, riding in far more luxury than he was used to, sat back in his seat, closed his eyes, and smiled.

“Tired?”

Castle cracked one eye. Across the aisle from him in the Gulfstream’s small cabin, MI-5 liaison Danny Jenkins raised his own drink—hot tea—to his lips, and took a sip.

“No. Too keyed up to be tired.”

Which was the truth. Frank doubted he’d be able to sleep for a while yet—even with the delay in Tampa, his mind was still filled with images from the shoot-out gone sour. The seared edges of his shirt where the squibs had exploded. Astrov, his bodyguards, and Bobby Saint lying dead on the pier, blood pooling around their bodies. Weeks, and Duka, and—

“I would think so.” Jenkins reached underneath his seat and pulled out a briefcase. “Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind having a look at the file now. It would save me a drive out to your place tomorrow.”

Castle managed a smile. Jenkins had flown all the way from London, via Miami, just to take this charter with him. The man had no doubt been instructed to pry Castle’s eyes open if necessary to make sure he reviewed the information tonight.

Frank held out his hand, and Danny put a file into it. Settling back in his seat, Castle began to read.

It was an MI-5 file on two Chechen extremists who had recently been tracked coming into the United Kingdom from Toronto. MI-5—Jenkins’s service—was asking for any FBI intelligence on the men. It was Frank’s job to determine whether or not to grant that request—to evaluate if any U.S. intelligence sources might be compromised in the process.

He was supposed to be making that evaluation on English soil, from his new desk as London FBI liaison. A job that didn't formally start for another two weeks. But the desk was empty until his arrival, and MI-5 needed the information now.

"Can't give you a yes or no at this second," Castle said, handing back the file. "But I'll make some calls first thing in the morning."

"Yes. Of course," Jenkins said.

"But you knew that already. Danny—tell me you didn't take this trip just to look me over."

"I didn't take this entire trip just to look you over." The man smiled. "Though of course I did have a certain . . . curiosity. Especially after the way Litton raved about you." Litton was ex-SAS; he and Frank had worked together in Bosnia, when Castle was Major Frank Castle of Delta Force. It was through Litton that Frank had gotten his new job. "No. What we really wanted, Frank, was to get you up to speed on the Chechen situation as soon as possible. It's not just these two—there's an entire group of them gathering in the U.K., and they're definitely up to something big. We'll want all interested agencies cooperating as soon as possible. We'll be nexus, but you'll have access to all that information, of course."

Castle nodded. He hadn't heard anything about the Chechens over the last few months, but then, since he'd been Otto Krieg for virtually every day of the last few months, that wasn't so surprising.

A phone rang. Jenkins reached into his pocket and pulled out a cellular.

"Excuse me," he said, turning away from Frank and beginning to talk.

So this was what being on a desk was going to be like, Frank thought. Studying paperwork, making decisions, talking them through, and then going home every night to his wife and son.

He couldn't wait.

He looked at his watch—his brand-new Rolex. They were two hours behind schedule now—not that anyone was meeting him at the airport, he'd given an approximate date and time for his arrival, but Maria knew better than to wait on anything for him, even moving day. Though Castle was still hoping to make it back in time to get the kitchen packed up himself. When they'd moved back east from California, the movers had managed to smash half the bowls in their wedding china, which had caused Maria to forbid anyone but herself from packing fragile items. She'd probably been up half the night getting ready, he thought, picturing her in his mind.

Funny thing was, when he thought of Maria, he always thought of her not as she was now, but as she'd been that first summer after they were married. The way she'd looked as they were saying good-bye, as he was getting shipped off to the Middle East for the first time.

Her bangs longer than they were now, hanging down over her forehead, her eyes misting over with tears, the way they had every time since then when he'd gone off on a mission. Gone off to leave her for months at a time, first alone and then with their son, Will. Castle thought of him now, too—the boy was getting so big, and the hell of it was, he'd missed almost everything so far in his son's life. The first word, the first step, the first day at school. The parent-teacher conferences, the class plays, the Little League games . . .

But not anymore. He'd sworn it to Maria, to his own father (who had quit the service rather than miss out on Frank's own childhood), and to himself. Castle had never been able to set aside the needs of the job before, the needs of the world out there; there was so much pain and suffering . . . but he knew now no one person could solve those problems. They were too big. He had to focus on the things closest to him, the things he could take care of. His family. His friends.

Thinking that, he looked down at the Rolex again and remembered Jimmy.

Weeks was somebody else he had to watch out for, take care of, Castle thought, before the man got himself into a hole so deep he couldn't climb out of it.

SIX

Families were funny, Howard Saint thought.

Consider, for instance, the Dukas. There was little Micky, cowering on the floor in front of him, and then there was Micky's dad, Mike. Who had been Howard Saint's in with the Trafficante family, way back when, when Saint first came down from Gainesville looking to make a name for himself. Who had gone on to become a big man in the Saint organization, until that day five years ago when he'd stepped in between Saint and Big Joe Galliano, stopping a bullet from Galliano's .45 in the process.

Mike and Micky. That was a contrast.

And then there was his own family. Himself, Livia, and the boys. John and Bobby. Who themselves had been a study in contrasts. The key phrase there being "had been."

Which brought him right back around to Micky Duka.

"Mr. Saint, I'm so sorry, I wanted you to know—"

Saint shook his head imperceptibly from side to side.

"No words, Micky. They don't matter. What will bring me comfort is watching the slow death of the man who was supposed to be taking care of my son. Keeping him out of trouble."

Saint saw Micky blink away tears. Quivering, sniveling idiot. Saint should kill him here and now, put the wretch out of his misery. Spare some other family the pain his was going through.

"What would your father say if he saw you here, Micky? He died for me. Your father was a man, and he died for me. What would he say about this?"

"I didn't know it was going to happen like this, please."

"Ignorance is no excuse."

Saint sensed his own men gathering behind him, waiting for his next move. Quentin and John, at his back. Dante and Spoon, on his left, and T.J. on his right.

Saint held his hand out for a gun. His right hand.

T.J. obliged by pulling out his weapon and giving it to Saint, who in turned aimed the gun at Duka's face.

The little man just froze.

"The person responsible has to die, Micky," Saint said.

Whereupon he turned around and shot T.J. in the shoulder.

Someone—Duka probably—let out a gasp of surprise. Saint kept his eyes focused on T.J., though. The man was slow to get it. He looked from his shoulder, up at Saint, and then back down again at his wound before speaking.

"No." He shook his head. "Mr. Saint . . . Bobby told me to stay! Ask John? John . . . tell him, come on." T.J.'s eyes focused over Saint's shoulder, looking to John for help. There was no reply. Not that it would have mattered. He'd brought Red Archeletta's eldest boy—slow and unsophisticated as he was—down from Alachua for one specific purpose. Keep Bobby Saint out of trouble. The man had failed at that simple task. Therefore, the man had to die.

Howard Saint took aim again and shot him in the knee.

T.J. howled in agony and crumpled to the floor.

Howard Saint smiled thinly.

"It was Bobby's idea," T.J. gasped. "He wanted to do a deal on his own to . . . to impress you."

"Thank you for that explanation," Saint replied, and shot out T.J.'s other knee.

The man screamed. Saint was aware of Spoon, behind him, turning away from the sight. He made note of that. There was no room for weak stomachs in his organization. He'd made that clear on several occasions.

T.J. continued to moan, trying to drag himself away from Saint as he did so. All at once, despite the obvious pain the man was suffering, Saint had had enough.

He stood over T.J. and fired point-blank into his heart.

The man shuddered once, and stopped moaning.

“My son didn’t need to impress me,” Howard Saint said, and dropped the gun on the dead man’s chest.

An hour later, Saint was at the city morgue, having sent Quentin and John home to watch over Livia, who, despite the drugs coursing through her system, was still unable to sleep. Dr. Bernini was on his way to the house, with instructions to keep her calm.

Dante and Spoon were out in the car, waiting for him. Both men were still obviously on edge, shaken up by what had happened to T.J., nervous about what might happen to them. Dante in particular had been close to Archeletta—under normal circumstances Saint would have had a word with him, stress how T.J. had been a basically good man (which was the truth, after all) who had made a single, unfortunate mistake, for which he had paid dearly. End of story.

Howard Saint, though, was not in an explaining mood.

Sergeant Kuipers and a patrolman Saint didn’t know (Carillo, his name tag read) met him at the door of the morgue and offered heartfelt expressions of sympathy as they led Saint into the bowels of the building. He accepted their words as graciously as he could, and asked about their families in return: Kuipers, he knew, had just had a son, his first child. Saint had sent along a savings bond for the boy’s education.

“He’s fine, Mr. Saint. Thank you for asking.”

Saint nodded, put a hand on Kuipers’s shoulder. “You watch out for him, Sergeant. You watch out for your boy.”

“You know I will sir. Thank you.”

Kuipers’s voice caught in his throat; Saint looked over at the sergeant and saw him blink away a tear.

Good man, Kuipers, he thought. Most people were, if you treated them right. It was just like the Bible said, just like his aunt Dorothea had told him: You do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Good deeds were always

rewarded. Bad ones, always punished. It was the maxim by which Saint lived his life.

They reached a set of double doors. Kuipers pushed them open and preceded him into a small, dimly lit room that smelled strongly of disinfectant. The viewing room. Saint had been in here a half-dozen times before to identify men who had died for him, men who had died on his orders. Those other times he'd been alone.

This time, there was a man waiting for him. Black man, in a black suit. A Fed. Saint glanced at him only briefly, before focusing his attention on the gurney behind him—and the body that lay on it.

He pushed past the man, who uttered something Saint didn't catch, and pulled the sheet back.

His dead son—his dead, pale-skinned son, the boy whom Saint had sat on his knee, had taken trick-or-treating every Halloween, had helped with his homework, had talked about girls with, had bought cars and clothes and computers and everything he'd wanted, the boy who had somehow slipped away from him and become a young man whom Saint was only just getting to know again—that boy stared up at the ceiling, his face frozen in an expression of surprise, his eyes wide and unseeing.

"Look what they did to my boy," Saint whispered, his voice barely audible. "Look what they did to my Bobby."

His son had a massive chest wound, the size of a softball, dark, coagulated blood still sticking to its edges. A chunk of his left leg was missing, like someone had taken a bite out of it.

The Fed stepped forward.

"Mr. Saint, are you identifying this body as your son, Robert Saint?"

Saint managed a nod.

"Yes."

Kuipers stepped up and put a hand on his arm.

"Mr. Saint. Let's—"

"He was a special boy," Howard Saint said, ignoring the gentle tug on his arm. "He deserved better."

The Fed pulled the sheet back up over Bobby. An orderly had entered at some point—he took hold of the gurney now and wheeled it out of the room.

Saint turned to the Fed.

"I'm sorry for your loss, sir," the man said.

But the man wasn't. Those words were rote—some higher-up somewhere had probably told him to be nice to Howard Saint. He didn't give a damn about Bobby—probably had written him off as a casualty of whatever operation had brought the Feds down to the waterfront in the first place.

Saint was going to see that his son stayed uppermost in this man's mind, however.

"Someone lied to him," he said. "Promised my boy one thing, gave him another."

The Fed blinked. "Sir?"

"Who was Otto Krieg?" Saint said, taking a step closer to the man. "Who did he work with? Who were his friends? Who stood to make money on this deal?"

The Fed was putting on his official face again. "We can't talk about the case, Mr. Saint. I understand your grief, but —"

"What's your name?"

"Special Agent James Weeks," the man replied.

"You in charge here, Mr. Weeks?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then help me. I want to know what happened to my boy, Mr. Weeks. And why."

Weeks shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't discuss the case, sir. It's policy."

"Policy?"

"That's right."

"My son is dead," Saint said, enunciating each word slowly and distinctly. "And you won't tell me anything?"

“I can’t, Mr. Saint. For your own safety, leave this to the professionals.”

Saint looked into the man’s eyes, and saw that Weeks was indeed not going to tell him a thing. He nodded. “Professionals, right. That’s a good idea. I’ll do that. Thank you.”

He let Kuipers lead him away then, out of the viewing room and back down the hallway.

Weeks was right. Leaving it to the professionals was just what Saint intended to do. Just not the professionals the agent had in mind.

By the time Kuipers and Carillo dropped him at his car, he was already making phone calls.

SEVEN

It was close to noon by the time Frank Castle finally got home.

The Gulfstream had landed hours earlier at Dulles, but Castle had been forced to spend much of that time in debriefing. Assistant Director Sandoval's chain was being yanked hard about Ares, about what had gone wrong down on the pier, and Castle had to explain all of it. The fact that it was Bobby Saint who'd queered the deal only made things worse; as crooked as Saint's father was rumored to be, he had friends in high places and was rattling their cages already. They had to keep a tight lid on what had really gone down, or the news would be all over the papers.

Weeks's ass was on the line as well; Frank could see that his friend was being primed to take a fall, for being the first one to fire a gun, even though he'd been using only blanks, even though that part of the op had been approved by Washington only days before. The only question was how far Weeks was going to get pushed, and when. Castle'd have to call Jimmy tonight, see how he was doing. But right now . . .

The car was stopping in front of his house. Not the driveway; the moving truck was parked there already. It was already half full; the crew sat in the open side doors, having their lunch. So much for his plans to pack the kitchen for Maria.

He opened his door, and climbed out. Marquez and Dillon—his bodyguards for the next week—got out of the car as well.

"You guys stay here, right?" Castle said. "Let me talk to her first."

"You got it, Frank," Dillon said. Marquez nodded his acceptance as well, and the two men took up position, one on either side of the car, scanning the surrounding neighborhood.

Castle sighed. Maria was not going to like having these two around. She never did. Frank thought their presence was particularly unnecessary in this case; what was going to happen to him? He supposed there was the off chance that someone in Astrov's organization would tumble to the fact that Otto Krieg hadn't been who he said he was, but Otto Krieg was dead. That trail would turn ice cold the second they went down it.

Protection was SOP for undercover operatives in these kinds of circumstances, though, so Marquez and Dillon were their houseguests for the next few days, until they were on the plane to Puerto Rico. Maria would just have to make the best of it.

He walked up to the front door. It was unlocked. He pushed, and it swung gently, silently, open.

Maria was there, in the hallway, her back to him, walking toward the kitchen. A stack of boxes marked FRAGILE—DISHES stood in the hall next to the front door.

She'd done it herself, of course. She was probably planning on carrying those boxes out to the truck herself as well.

He was about to call out her name when she froze in her tracks and then, very slowly, turned around to face him.

She was wearing jeans, and his old Ohio State sweatshirt. Her hair was up, a red bandana holding it in place, off her forehead. She wore no makeup. There was a streak of grime across one side of her face and a reddish stain— paint? jelly?—across the OSU symbol.

And despite all that . . . she looked beautiful.

Without a word, they walked toward each other and embraced. He held her as tight as he dared, till he feared she might break in his arms.

Then he let go, and they kissed.

She stepped back and looked up at him, her eyes piercing, seeing into parts of him that no one else even knew existed.

"That was a hard one," she said softly.

He nodded. "That was the last one."

She looked over his shoulder, and her face changed.

"Those are bodyguards, Frank."

"Protocol, honey. You know that."

She frowned.

"Look, some guys get a gold watch. I get Jake and Elmo."

"Jake and Elmo?"

"Marquez and Dillon. They're good guys. They know the drill. They'll stay out of the way."

"Hmmmphhh." She didn't look convinced. "Looks like you got the gold watch, too." She pointed to his wrist.

"Yeah. Jimmy gave it to me." He held it up so she could get a closer look. "Poor guy."

"Why 'poor guy'?"

Frank took a deep breath, then told her everything. How carefully the op had been set up, how disastrously it had gone wrong. How Weeks was on the hot seat because of it.

She was frowning when he finished.

"So this isn't over," she said. "That's why those two—"

"No." Castle shook his head firmly. "You know I wouldn't be anywhere near here if it wasn't safe. I'm retired. It's over."

"Okay. I believe you. Only . . ."

"What?"

"You'll have to tell that to your son. He's not buying it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he doesn't believe me. He thinks this is just one more move. Not the last one by a long shot."

Frank sighed. He knew that Will was having a hard time leaving Virginia, which was not a surprise. His son hadn't liked moving the last two times, either, though he had been barely three when they'd left the D.C. area for the first time, probably just picking up on his mother's sadness at having to leave her family and friends and move out west. And as much as he hadn't wanted to leave Sacramento a few years after that, he'd still been relatively young then—first grade,

not a lot of close friends—so as upset as Will had been, Frank had known the boy would get over it soon enough.

But this time . . .

Will was old enough to have real buddies. To have formed attachments to his teachers and this area. And he was smart enough to realize that the move to London meant leaving all those things behind for good. His son had been alternately despondent and furious about the move last time Frank was home, and, according to Maria, he hadn't gotten any fonder of the idea in the months since.

"I'll go talk to him," Frank said. "Where is he?"

"You know."

Frank nodded. He knew. His eyes went, unconsciously, to the end of the hall and the door that led out to the backyard.

"Be gentle with him, Frank."

Castle smiled. "I'm a teddy bear, honey. You know that."

"Yeah." She gestured toward the boxes in the hall. "Hurry up and talk to him, Mr. Bear, all right? Then help me move those before the movers come back from lunch."

He made a show of bowing. "Your wish is my command."

"That's just the way I like it."

They shared a smile, followed by a kiss. Maria went to finish packing up the kitchen, and Frank Castle went off in search of his son.

One thing he was going to miss about this house, Castle thought. The backyard. It was one of the things that had attracted them to the property in the first place—a quarter acre of flat, treeless lawn that was going to be perfect for pickup football games, or for staking out a ball field. Frank remembered putting Will to sleep one winter night after they'd first moved in, looking out the window at the snow-covered lawn with his son, and making a promise.

"Soon as the snow melts," he'd said to Will, who must have been all of six years old, "we're setting up a baseball field. Complete with a pitching mound."

“A pitching mound?” Will had smiled. “Cool.”

But Castle had gone away a week later and not come back until the following winter. And he’d never, ever built that pitching mound for his son.

Shaking his head in disgust, Frank bent down and picked a ball up from the immaculately trimmed lawn. They had a yard service that came in twice a month and cut his grass, trimmed the shrubs, raked the lawn in the fall. He’d never done any of that, either.

In the very middle of the lawn stood a Pitchback. Next to it was a small doghouse with BUCK stenciled over the door. Castle paused a moment and listened. He heard the sounds of something scrabbling around in the doghouse.

Then he gripped the ball in his right hand, reared back, and threw. The ball struck outside the yellow stripe by a good yard, and bounced back to him.

Ball one.

Castle had a sudden urge to wheel and throw the ball high up in the air, throw it as far across the lawn as he could. Buck would come bounding out of the doghouse then, streaking across the lawn in a flash, tongue wagging, and, like as not, pluck the ball right out of the air.

Except that Buck had died last summer, in the middle of July, while Castle had been busy courting Micky Duka down in Florida. His dog—but it was his wife and son who’d had to take him to the vet and put him down.

Castle blinked away tears of self-pity and focused.

This wasn’t about him right now, or even about his dog. It was about Will.

“What I miss most about Buck?” he said out loud, rearing back and throwing the ball again. Ball two, even farther outside. “He could catch a ball. No matter how hard you threw it—*snap*—he was right there.”

No response. Castle held the ball in his hand, studied his grip a second, positioned his hand across the seams. Then he reared back and threw once more.

Ball three. The ball bounced back to him.

"God, I miss that dog. He sure would have loved chasing those big brown rabbits they've got over in England."

"I thought you said we weren't going to have a yard."

The voice—hesitant, barely audible—belonged to his son, Will. It seemed different than the last time he'd heard it, though, a few weeks back. Was that possible? That Will's voice was changing?

No. It had to be his imagination.

"We don't," he replied. "Not really. But there's a park nearby we get to use. They'll have rabbits there."

"No baseball fields, though. Right? They play that stupid cricket game there. Don't they?"

"Will. I know you're upset about this. I understand, believe me. When I was your age—"

"Don't they?"

Castle sighed. "Yes. They play cricket there. But—"

"Why are we always moving?"

The voice from the doghouse was louder now. Angrier. Thick with tears, perhaps? Frank wondered how long his son had been out here, brooding.

"It's because of my job, Will. Or it was. This is the last time—I promise."

"You said that the last time."

"I did?" Frank frowned. He couldn't recall ever having spoken those words before, but he supposed it was possible. When he'd originally signed on for the FBI Undercover Task Force, one of the reasons had been that no matter where his undercover roles took him, his family could remain here and build a home. Maybe he had said that—or something like it—to Will back then.

His son crawled out of the doghouse, dragging his baseball glove with him. He stood up, hands on hips, and glared at his father.

"That's what you said. You said we're leaving California, and we're going to live in Virginia, and you're going to work

in Washington, and we're never going to move again."

"I guess I've said a lot of things, huh?"

"Yeah. You have."

Frank nodded, took the opportunity to study his son.

He'd grown again. Another inch, Castle guessed. Hadn't put on any more weight, but that would come. Frank himself had been a beanpole in school till ninth grade, when he'd suddenly filled out.

"So why London?" his son asked.

"London is a safe place where we can all be together."

"All of us? You included?"

"That's right. Me included. No more moving around, I promise."

His son looked skeptical.

"Will. When you get a little older, I'll tell you why we had to move so much. Why I couldn't be home with you more."

His son looked down at the ground.

"I already know."

"You do?"

"You always say, Will, keep your eyes open. I keep my eyes open."

Castle couldn't help but wonder if he was talking about Buccaneer Bay.

It had been almost a year since that awful day when the two of them (Frank on a rare vacation from his Otto Krieg identity) had been caught up in the middle of a terrorist incident. Buccaneer Bay was an Orlando tourist attraction that featured the *José Gasparilla*—the world's only remaining fully rigged pirate sailing ship. Six members of Sato X, a Japanese terrorist organization, had somehow snuck weapons onto the boat, which they then used to take sixty-five innocent tourists hostage.

The group they captured, however, included a sixty-sixth person, Frank Castle, who escaped during the terrorists' assault. He'd then donned a pirate's outfit, complete with skull mask (courtesy of one of the animatronic attractions

on the ride) and set about rescuing the hostages. Within an hour, the terrorists were all dead, the tourists safe and sound, and their anonymous rescuer had mysteriously vanished.

Afterward, Will had asked him a lot of questions. If he'd been involved in killing the terrorists. If he knew who the man in the skull mask was. Frank had dodged his questions for the most part—he and Maria agreed that the less the boy knew specifically about what kind of work his father did, the better. Now Frank wondered if it wasn't time to take Will into his confidence.

Another decision he and Maria would have to make together, Castle realized.

"I'm not going to be doing the same thing anymore," was what he told his son. "I'll be working in an office. Every day."

"For the government still?"

Which was about the extent of Will's knowledge of his job right now. "Yes. Still for the government."

Will nodded, his curiosity seemingly sated for the moment.

"Okay," he said, taking hold of the Pitchback and starting to drag it back toward the house.

"Whoa. Where are you going with that?"

"The truck. Mom said to bring whatever I wanted from the yard to the truck."

"Not that." Castle took the Pitchback gently from his son and threw it back into the yard. "You don't need that anymore."

"Dad." Will frowned. "You're not going to make me play cricket, are you?"

"Of course not."

"So why—" his son gestured toward the Pitchback. "I wanna bring it."

"No. You don't need that anymore. From now on, you're playing with me."

"Really?"

“That’s right.” Castle put an arm around his son’s shoulder. Will smiled up at him.

There was a sudden crash from inside the house.

Frank looked up and, through the still-open back door, saw Maria yelling at one of the movers. Next to the man, one of the kitchen boxes lay tipped on its side.

“What’s mom yelling for?” Will asked.

Castle sighed. “I think she hates moving even more than you do.”

EIGHT

"I called New York," Glass said. "Who called Las Vegas, who called Europe and Hong Kong. We even got the Sicilians on it, for old time's sake."

"Hold on." Howard Saint stepped back from the bunker and watched the shot he'd just hit rim out of the hole. Damn. Fifteenth time in a row he'd missed from this particular practice tee, his favorite practice tee, on his favorite golf course, the Tampa Country Club golf course, which he knew like the back of his own hand, hell, better than the back of his own hand, and he never missed any shot here fifteen times in a row. Not under normal circumstances, at least.

These were far from normal circumstances, however.

Tomorrow afternoon, they were burying his son.

Saint prided himself in that he had managed to keep up at least a semblance of normalcy these past few days. He'd met with Chadwick again, had managed a condolence call to Reston's wife and another to Red Archeletta, and had even put in a half day at the office yesterday. Livia, though . . .

She was coming apart at the seams. Behaving like a madwoman.

He'd come home early yesterday afternoon to find that she'd ordered all of Bobby's things taken out of his room and moved into storage. And last night she'd excused herself from dinner early, pleading exhaustion, but when he walked into their bedroom a few hours later, he found her wide awake, sitting in front of the fireplace, a photo album filled with pictures of Bobby in her lap, pictures she was taking from the book one by one and tossing onto the fire. Burning, as if by erasing what remained of his physical presence from her life she could erase the pain she was feeling as well.

"Pop."

His son John stepped forward and handed him another ball from the bucket. Saint set it down and swung.

Miss number sixteen.

John held out another. Saint shook his head.

"All right, Quentin. What do we know?"

"This Krieg guy, who brokered the deal—he's a mystery man. Can't find anything on him."

"Nothing?"

"Nada. We got his picture off Dutch immigration, and we're circulating it now. Something's bound to come up."

"Okay. What about Krieg's boss—Astrov?"

"Ah." Glass smiled. "Everybody knew Astrov. Biggest arms trafficker in the world up until the other night. His organization sold to everybody. Governments, rebels, terrorist groups—you had the cash, he had weapons for you. He was top ten on everyone's most-wanted list."

"A legitimate target."

"That's right."

"Looks like Bobby just got in the way, Pop," John Saint added.

Howard nodded. That was how it looked, all right. Astrov had been set up and then taken down by the FBI. Bobby had fallen with him.

One thing bothered Saint, though.

"How'd they know?"

"Pop?"

"How did the Feds know the deal was going down that night?" he asked. "A man like Astrov, he has to be very careful about who buys from him. Who's involved in the transaction. Anything at all smells fishy . . . he's out of there, in a hurry."

John frowned. "What are you saying?"

Glass knew. "You think somebody tipped them off? Duka, maybe?"

Saint shook his head. "No. The way he was whimpering the other night . . . if he'd had anything on his conscience,

he would have told us.”

“So . . . ?” Glass asked.

“I’m not sure.” He thought a moment. “The Feds. Can we get a look at their files—see what they knew, how they knew it . . . ?”

“Doubtful. Not for a while, at least,” Quentin said. They had sources inside the bureau, but not high enough up to warrant a look at an active op without raising suspicions.

“Okay. Not the files.” Saint thought a minute. “What about the people? Tell me about Weeks.”

“FBI Special Agent James Weeks. Age thirty-seven. Former Green Beret. Recruited by the FBI eight years ago, recently assigned to the bureau’s Florida Division. Divorced. Pays his taxes, avoids hookers. No drug problems . . .”

Saint shook his head. “So, a typical tight-assed Fed.” Damn. Nothing there. He held his hand out. John put another ball in it.

His son was smiling. So was Quentin.

“What?”

“A note of interest: Weeks frequents an establishment in Ybor City. Owned by two of our clients. The Toro brothers.”

Saint blinked. That was a surprise.

“He gambles?”

John nodded. “Roulette when he’s up, blackjack when he’s down.”

All at once, Howard Saint found he was smiling, too.

“I thought that might interest you,” Quentin said.

“More than interest.” For the first time in a while, in fact, Saint felt as if he’d caught a lucky break.

He set the ball his son had given him down on the tee, and lined up his shot.

“See, I was born in the Alachua swamps. Alachua County folk believe everything’s fated. So they read tea leaves, cut open fish guts, cast sticks on the ground, all to get a glimpse of their future. Now me . . . I’m educated. I don’t

believe a stitch of it. But this?" He shook his head. "This is something we can use. This smells like fate."

Saint set the head of his club against the ball, and planted his feet. He looked up at the hole, and realized what he'd been doing wrong this entire time. Guiding the ball, not hitting it firmly. Not being decisive. Which wasn't like him at all.

"Not to burst your bubble, Pop," John began, "but what if the guy's clean?"

"Clean? John." Saint shook his head, and positioned his feet slightly farther away from the ball. There. "There's one thing about this Weeks I can guarantee: he's not clean. No, a man who gambles, especially a man who gambles with the Toros, excuse me a minute—" Saint smiled, and swung. The ball flew straight, bounced once, and landed in the cup. "—is a man with a history," he finished.

It was only later, after he'd spoken at some length with his clients, that Howard Saint realized just how extensive— and how potentially useful—that history was.

Saint had a meeting—cocktails and an early supper—scheduled with Chadwick and a group of potential campaign donors: he begged off. He told Livia he might not be home until very late: he heard disappointment in her voice at first, but when he told her where he was headed and why, steel replaced the sadness.

"You find out why our son is dead, Howard," she told him. "And don't take any crap off those Cuban cocksuckers."

He hung up, smiling at her choice of words. Livia was as Cuban as the Toros, born and bred in the Ybor City barrios, just a few blocks from the nightclub Joe and Mike Toro ran. Not a fact she always advertised, and he understood why. His wife had barely made it out of that neighborhood alive—she did not like being reminded of her time there, and what she'd had to do to escape.

She did not even like the fact that he did business with the brothers Toro, though he could hardly afford not to. From

a dollars-and-cents perspective, they were very, very important customers. His most important, if you looked at the bottom line.

Which Howard Saint tried to keep in mind later, as he and Quentin Glass sat with Mike and Joe inside their office, discussing business in general, and tonight's business in particular, while waiting for the man of the hour, as it were, to show.

Saint swirled a swizzle stick through his drink. Glass looked at his fingernails.

Mike Toro sat at a desk in front of a set of drawn, dirty blinds. His brother Joe stood behind him.

"You all right, Howard?" Joe asked. "You want me to freshen your drink?"

"I'm fine."

Joe nodded. "What about you, Quentin? You sure you don't want something?"

"No."

"Okay. Quentin," Joe said.

For some reason, he and his brother seemed to find the name "Quentin" funny. Under normal circumstances, Howard Saint would have demanded that they show his employee—his friend—proper respect. But again . . .

These were not normal circumstances.

"So, Howard." Mike Toro leaned forward on his desk. "For ten years we've done business, ten years you've handled our money, and this is the first time you've come to my office and seen where the money comes from!"

"That's right." Saint managed a polite nod. "This is the first time."

"Exactly. You never invite me to your house, and I know you're not a silver spooner any more than me, so why not be social? Get together once in a while? We have a lot in common. Your wife, I understand, is Cuban. Born over on Eighth Street—am I right, Joe?"

"Yeah." Joe Toro smiled. "Eighth Street. Maybe we knew her, when we were growing up."

"Maybe. That would be funny, wouldn't it, Howard?" Saint had had about enough.

"Joe. Mike. I can't think about funny right now. My son is dead."

"We didn't kill him," Joe said.

"I didn't say that."

Mike spoke up now. "And I can't bring him back, Howard, so if you think I'm Jesus Christ, you're in the wrong church."

The two men locked eyes then, and Howard Saint realized something.

He'd been misjudging Mike Toro all these years. He thought him a buffoon—a two-bit gangster who'd gotten where he was by breaking legs and cutting corners. But now Saint saw that was a mask, that the real Mike Toro was both smarter and scarier than he'd realized. A smart, scary, powerful man. An interesting, potentially very useful combination of traits. Considering.

"So, Mike," Saint said. "Maybe you've heard I've been thinking about politics lately."

"Yeah. I heard some talk."

"Thing is, this part of town . . ."

"Ybor City."

"Ybor City, exactly. This part of town, I'm not as familiar with as maybe I should be."

"Maybe I can help you out."

"I'd like that," Saint nodded. "If we could find a few minutes—"

A red light flashed on Mike Toro's desk.

"Ah," Mike said, turning to his brother.

Joe Toro nodded, and smiled.

"Showtime," he said, and drew the blinds.

They'd been covering up a window, Howard Saint saw. A window that looked out onto the main room of the Toro brothers' nightclub. A room not much bigger than the

upstairs bar at Saints and Sinners, but easily twice, maybe three times as crowded as that space ever got. There had to be two hundred people crammed into that space tonight, most of them here for one reason only. A little action, to be found at the gambling tables—roulette, blackjack, craps, poker—now visible outside the office.

James Weeks was at one of those tables. He stood not ten feet away from them, buying himself a big stack of chips.

Saint forgot all about the governor's race.

"Two-way mirror?" he asked.

Joe nodded. "We got 'em all over. But this is the best view."

"Good." Howard settled back in his chair, then, and began to watch.

Weeks started at one of the blackjack tables. Started out winning, in fact—as near as Saint could make out, the man was up several hundred dollars in the first half hour.

Which did not make the Toro brothers happy.

"Look at him, Joe," Mike Toro said, shaking his head. "Drinking our rum, and playing cards at our tables."

"Fuckin' Fed." Joe turned around and spoke to Saint. "We can kill him right now, Howard. If that's what you want."

"No. As we discussed."

"You got it." Mike Toro leaned forward and picked up a phone.

In a very short span of time, then, Weeks's luck began to change. Within an hour, he'd lost half his original stake. He moved over to the roulette wheel, then, and continued to lose. Saint watched him and shook his head. Weeks had obviously never heard the phrase "quit while you're ahead." On the contrary, this man was in the grip of a sickness—in the long run, it didn't matter that the games were fixed against him; Weeks would have played until he lost everything anyway.

Which, several long hours later, was exactly what happened.

The Toros went out to talk to him. Saint hung back in the office, with Quentin, and watched.

"Guy's lucky he's still got a shirt," Glass said, moving his chair up next to Saint's.

Howard nodded. The club was completely deserted, save for a janitor, sweeping up by the roulette tables, and a very rumpled-looking Weeks, slumped in the same chair he'd been losing in for the last several hours.

The agent looked up as the Toro brothers approached.

"Lay one hand on me, and fifty federal agents will raid this place in the morning—with warrants."

Saint shook his head. Pathetic. Not only was the man a gambler, he was a drunk, too.

Mike Toro shook his head and smiled.

"Go get your warrants. 'Hey, Your Honor, we want to bust this illegal gambling joint where I lost two hundred grand.' You'll be a meter maid before breakfast."

"I'll get a month suspension. A slap on the wrist."

"Really?" Mike Toro frowned. "Is that right, Joe? Is that what'll happen?"

Joe had circled around the table. He stood next to Weeks and leaned right over the man so their faces were inches apart.

"Don't think so, Mike. Think our federal friend here's a little off the mark. Considering."

"What do you mean?" Weeks asked.

"Slap on the wrist—that's what you get the first time," Joe said. "They send you to Gamblers Anonymous, clip a couple paychecks . . . everything's hunky-dory. But twice? Not so hunky. Not so dory."

The smile was gone from Weeks's face now. Neither of the Toros looked amused either.

"This ain't your first time, is it, Weeksie?"

"Don't call me that."

"Weeksie."

"Read the numbers, Joe," Mike Toro said.

Joe produced a piece of paper from his pocket—the same one he'd showed Howard Saint when Saint and Quentin had arrived earlier this evening—and read from it.

"On May third you lost twenty-seven grand. On May seventeenth, forty-three. June twelfth . . . ouch." A trace of a smile played across Joe's face. "One hundred and thirty-four grand. You've already sold everything you own. So where'd you get the money?"

Weeks tried to get to his feet.

Joe pushed him back down.

"Seriously, my friend. How did you pay?"

"I don't have to tell you anything," the man said.

"You don't need to." Mike Toro spoke again. "A friend of ours downtown works in the federal evidence locker. Where all the seized cash and drugs go?"

Weeks paled.

"Ah." Mike smiled. "I see by your expression you're familiar with the place. I thought you might be."

Watching from the Toros' office, Saint smiled as well. The Toros were doing well, even if Mike had exaggerated somewhat, as it was actually a friend of Saint's who worked in the federal evidence locker. No matter.

The important thing here was Weeks, who was going to crack, even more easily than Howard Saint had dreamed possible.

"We know the locker, too," Mike Toro continued. "Because a lot of our product's in there. Anyway, this guy says there's two hundred g's missing. Wait." He looked up at his brother. "This is a coincidence."

"Sure is, Mike." Joe put a hand on Weeks's shoulder. "Hey, Weeksie—you're the supervisory agent down there, aren't you? I think you're going to jail."

Weeks shrugged Toro's hand off angrily.

"A lot of agents have access to that locker," he said. "I'm not the only—"

"You don't get a wrist slap in jail, Agent Weeks," Mike Toro said, ignoring the man's protests. "You get a bitch slap."

Weeks shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "Listen, guys," he said. "Maybe there's a way—"

Mike Toro raised a hand. "Don't say anything."

Confusion crossed Weeks's face. "What?"

Joe Toro leaned over him again and spoke slowly and distinctly.

"Shut up."

Mike turned and looked up at the two-way mirror.

"We got someone who wants to talk to you, Agent Weeks," he said. "You cooperate with him, we'll talk about your debts and how you might be able to repay them."

Howard Saint knew a cue when he heard it. He walked out of the office into the gambling room, Glass a step behind him.

Weeks saw him coming and rose, trembling, naked terror in his eyes.

"Sit down," Saint told him. "If I wanted to kill you, it would be done. You're worth more to me alive."

Weeks sat.

"I want to know everything about what happened that night, Mr. Weeks. Starting from the moment you arrived on the pier to the instant my son was killed. Can you do that for me?"

Weeks nodded.

"Good. Go on then."

Saint stood over the man, arms folded across his chest, and listened impassively as Weeks laid out the whole operation for him in painstaking detail. Names of agents, officers, arrival times, and specific orders each group of law enforcement personnel had been given. Saint listened, and he watched Weeks's eyes, his body language, and decided that the explanation was too pat, too smooth. Almost as if it had been rehearsed.

Was Weeks lying to him? If so, why?

Howard Saint's mind went back to earlier today, on the golf course, and the question he'd asked John and Quentin then.

"How did you know?" he said to Weeks, interrupting the man in midsentence.

"What?"

"How did you know?" Howard Saint repeated. "About the deal that night? Surveillance? A man on the inside?"

Something flickered in Weeks's eyes.

"Surveillance," the agent answered, a little too quickly.

"On the boat. We tracked it out from Belfast a week before."

Saint shook his head. "I don't think so. I think you had an informant. A turncoat, inside Astrov's organization, feeding you information all along. Isn't that true, Mr. Weeks?"

"No," the man said reflexively. "That's not how it was, sir. We had cooperation from Interpol; I can show you the paperwork. I can even put you in touch with . . ."

Weeks droned on, but Saint wasn't listening. He was thinking. Comparing Weeks's version of events with the one Micky Duka had given him. They were identical, no clues there about who the Feds' mystery man might be. . . .

Mystery man.

That was just how Quentin had described Otto Krieg today.

"Agent Weeks," Saint said abruptly, interrupting the man. "Two nights ago, I asked you about Otto Krieg. Could we open that inquiry again?"

Saint saw the look of terror that suddenly came into his eyes, and thought: Bingo.

"I don't know what I can tell you about him, Mr. Saint. I mean, the guy's dead, that's the most relevant fact."

"Humor me, if you would. Tell me what Krieg did before he got involved with Astrov. Where he's from. A little of his personal history. Surely you know some details."

Weeks shook his head.

“Not off the top of my head, but I could get them. We have a file; I could get the file. Be happy to, just—”

“Agent Weeks.” Howard Saint leaned over the man, and now he could smell his fear; he knew that whatever the reason his son had died, this Otto Krieg was at the heart of it. “I’m no fool. Don’t treat me like one. Otto Krieg.”

He put a hand on the man’s shoulder and felt him trembling.

“You got problems. Two hundred g’s worth of problems, Agent Weeks,” Mike Toro said. “Don’t make it worse.”

His brother nodded. “Don’t forget about the bitch slapping, Weeksie. You gotta consider that, too.”

Weeks swallowed hard.

“Otto Krieg,” Howard Saint said again.

Weeks took a deep breath then and looked up at Saint.

At that instant he looked utterly defeated, utterly miserable, as if he’d lost his last friend in the world.

“That’s not his real name.”

“Really?” Howard Saint pulled up a chair and sat down next to Weeks.

“That’s very interesting,” he said. “Tell me more.”

NINE

Sun on his face. Warm water on his skin. The smells and sounds of street vendors and musicians coming from the pier next to him—*empanadillas* and *bacalaitos*, steel-drum music, the laughter of friends and family . . .

So this is what it feels like to be relaxed, Frank Castle thought. He'd just about forgotten.

"Dad."

Frank Castle turned. Will bobbed in the water next to him, his skin already the color of dark coffee after only two days in the tropical sun.

"You all set?" Frank asked.

Will nodded.

"All right. Remember what I said. Take a big deep breath—nice, easy, even strokes—and—"

"I know, Dad," Will said impatiently. "Come on, let's go already."

"All right." He smiled at the boy's eagerness. Will was right. They'd been prepping for this dive all morning. The boy was either ready or he wasn't. They'd find out in a minute.

Castle pulled his arm out of the water, looked at his Rolex, and immediately realized he'd forgotten to call Jimmy Weeks again. Damn. He'd been meaning to do that since they landed at San Juan yesterday morning. See if there'd been any further fallout from Ares. Last e-mail he'd gotten from Sandoval had been nebulous, the deputy director had dodged around every question he'd posed, and Jimmy for some reason hadn't answered his phone for two days, so—

"Earth to Dad. Come in, Dad."

Castle blinked and looked up at his son.

"Sorry. Here we go." Putting Weeks out of his mind for the moment, Castle focused on the second hand, sweeping

toward the six. “Okay. Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . and . . . dive.”

Will sucked in air, and plunged beneath the water’s surface. Good kick, good form. He’d give the boy a five second head start, then go after him.

This would be their last dive of the morning—they’d been at it since right after breakfast, both in and out of gear. Castle still had his equipment on, but Will was diving in trunks only now. There were a lot of amazing places around here to scuba dive—they were a half hour south of the Black Wall, and that was something he wanted Will to experience this trip for sure, six-foot moray eels, black coral reefs, water so clear you felt as if you were swimming in an aquarium—but before he took his son any deeper out into the ocean, he wanted to make sure that Will understood diving equipment was fallible, no matter how many times you tested it, and that the only thing you could count on in the water was yourself, your lung power, your muscle power.

Five seconds. Castle slipped on his mask and regulator, and dove.

The seafloor here sloped gently down from the beach. Right off the pier, where they were now, it reached a depth of perhaps twenty, twenty-five feet, running up against a small reef, dotted here and there with underwater caves.

Will swam—nice, easy, even strokes—toward the entrance to one of those caves, in front of which Castle had left the boy’s tank and regulator.

With a last kick, his son reached the scuba equipment. Will turned to his dad, gave a thumbs-up, and bent down to pick it up.

Frank shook his head and pointed toward the surface. Ascend.

For an instant, he saw confusion on the boy’s face. That, and maybe a trace of panic. Castle had told him the test was to see if he could reach the equipment and put it on—

not reach it and then surface again. He could guess at the thoughts running through Will's head: I need the tank now. I need the oxygen.

Castle met his son's eyes impassively. It was Will's call; either way, the boy had done well this morning. It was only his second day of diving. They could come back tomorrow. No shame in not being able to do the dive both ways.

No shame—but no glory, either.

Will dropped the regulator and shot up off the ocean floor then, so quickly that Castle found himself kicking hard just to keep his son in sight.

When he broke the surface, Will was already there. Gasping for breath and smiling. Waving toward his mother, who stood on the beach, hands on hips. Castle couldn't see the expression on Maria's face, but from her body language, she was not thrilled. No surprise there—she didn't think Will was old enough to be scuba diving yet, had, in fact, tried to send the boy snorkeling with his cousins this morning, only to have Will declare that looking at tropical fish in two feet of water was “for babies.”

Behind Maria, a man suddenly stood up and waved back at Will. Frank's father. Castle would bet money he was smiling, at least.

“Trying to trick me, huh?” Will said, still a little out of breath.

“Nope. Trying to test you. You did good.” Frank mussed his son's hair. “Come on. Let's go calm your mother down.”

“Do we have to?”

“We do. It's time for lunch, anyway.”

“What about the tank? My regulator.”

“We leave it for now. We'll be back.”

They swam to shore. Maria was there to wrap a towel around Will. Frank Sr. clapped his grandson on the back.

“He did it?” the elder Castle asked.

Frank nodded.

“Free ascent on the first try. I’ve seen Navy SEALs do worse.”

“That’s what we like to hear.”

Maria shook her head.

“This is supposed to be vacation, not basic training.”

Frank opened his mouth to respond, but Will beat him to it.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll take it easy on him.” Everyone—except Maria—laughed.

Frank put an arm around his wife and drew her close.

“He did great. And I was there the whole time, honey. Nothing to worry about.”

“Hmmpphhh.”

Castle kissed his wife. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Anyone hungry?”

Frank turned. His mother—Betty Castle—was on a blanket behind them, an open picnic hamper next to her. “We’ve got sandwiches, *empanadillas* . . .”

Will knelt in the sand next to the hamper and pulled out a sandwich. “Tuna. Yeah,” he said, and took half in a single bite.

“William Francis Castle.” Frank’s mother shook her head. “Where did you learn your manners?”

“From Grandpa,” Will said, nodding toward Frank Sr., who had just taken a sandwich of his own and swallowed it almost entire.

Betty glared at her husband.

“Frank? Who is that?” Castle turned. Maria was pointing out at the dock, where an old man was refueling a beat-up dugout outrigger.

Frank and his father exchanged a smile.

“Manuel Candelaria,” the elder Castle said. “The locals claim he’s a witch doctor.”

“Wow. A real witch doctor?” Will stood up. “Can we go talk to him? Maybe he can teach us some spells.”

“Not likely. He lives on an island, around the point. Only one person’s ever had the guts to swim out to it.”

Maria looked at Frank. “Gee. Let me guess.”

“Cool!” Will said. “Let’s go diving there!”

“No. Absolutely not.” Maria shook her head. “Not until you’re certified.”

“Or tomorrow morning,” Frank said. “Whichever comes first.”

“Yes!” Will gave him a high five. Maria gave him a glare.

“Frank . . .”

Castle shrugged. “I’ll be right there with him, honey. Nothing to worry about.”

Frank Sr. stepped up behind his son and grandson then, and threw one arm around each of their shoulders. “We’ll both be there. Already rented the boat to take us out, in fact.”

His father gestured toward the dock then, and Frank saw, moored next to Candelaria’s boat, a small launch, outboard motor pulled up and out of the water.

“Nothing fancy,” Frank Sr. said. “But it’ll do the trick.”

“Just how long have you all been planning this little expedition?” Maria asked.

Frank shrugged. So did his father.

Betty leaned forward and spoke to Maria.

“Nothing you can do about it, honey. You married a Castle.”

Maria shook her head. But Castle saw that smile was back. He smiled, too.

“Who wants ice cream?” Frank Sr. asked. “My treat.”

“I’m in,” Will said. “Dad?”

“You know it.”

“Boys.” Betty Castle looked up at her husband, son, and grandson. “Don’t stuff yourselves. Remember the dinner tonight.”

Right. Frank had almost forgotten. The big dinner—the centerpiece of the entire week’s reunion, taking place in

less than . . . five hours, he realized, looking at his watch.

And seeing the Rolex, he thought of Jimmy Weeks again, and he wished his friend could be there, too. Weeks and his family had come to the last reunion in Puerto Rico, five years ago. They'd had a helluva time, the two of them. Even without Gwen, Jimmy ought to be here. Frank had to call him, see if he couldn't convince the man to take a day or two off, come down here and relax. It would do Weeks good to get out of the pressure cooker for a while.

After all, all work and no play . . .

"Dad!"

Frank turned and saw his son, already halfway to the pier and the ice-cream stand on it, motioning to him to hurry.

"Come on. Let's go!"

Smiling, Frank Castle hurried to catch up to his boy.

TEN

For Livia's sake, Howard Saint had agreed to have a priest at the grave. It made no difference to him one way or the other, just as it had made no difference to him whether or not the boys had been baptized, or attended church at all. All that talk about the ways of God being a mystery, about the Lord taking back his own, if it gave Livia some sense of comfort, fine.

He planned to find comfort elsewhere.

Exactly where, he expected to discover very soon. Any minute now, in fact.

"Mr. Saint?"

Dante stood in front of him, holding out a shovel.

Saint realized Father Cusmano had finished talking, had, in fact, stepped back from the grave and was now looking in his direction expectantly.

Saint carefully unhooked his arm from Livia's. As he did so, John pulled his mother closer, to support her.

Saint took the shovel from Dante. He scooped up a spadeful of the black earth piled next to his son's grave and dropped it onto the polished mahogany of Bobby Saint's coffin.

It struck him then, for the first time in the last couple days. His boy was dead, his body cold inside that wooden box right there, soon to be food for the worms.

Saint trembled with rage.

He dropped the shovel on the ground and looked up. Some of what he was feeling must have shown on his face. Father Cusmano flinched and took a step back.

Saint spun on his heel, took Livia's arm, and without a word, led his family down the hill, past the crowd of mourners lined up twenty deep around the grave, past the line of limousines along the cemetery drive, back to their own waiting car.

Lincoln and Cutter held the doors as the three of them climbed inside, Livia in the middle.

"I've changed my mind, Howard. I want to go home," his wife said.

Saint nodded. There was a memorial luncheon planned at Casablanca, but if Livia didn't want to go, she didn't have to go.

"John," he said, turning to his son, "you can represent us there—can't you?"

"Sure, Pop. I'll do it."

Saint leaned forward, about to tap on the window glass to give Dante instructions, when he sensed a car pulling up alongside them.

He turned and saw Quentin Glass climbing out of the newly arrived vehicle's passenger door, a thick manila envelope in his hand.

Saint rolled down his window. Glass tossed the envelope in his lap.

"From our Mr. Weeks. He apologized profusely for taking so long."

Saint opened the envelope and pulled out two files. The first had printed across it:

OPERATION ARES EYES ONLY

SURVEILLANCE SUBJECT: MICKEY DUKA

Inside was a sheaf of papers. Saint glanced quickly through them; there was a lot of background information on Micky Duka, little of which was new to him.

The last few pages were slightly more interesting. Transcripts of conversations apparently recorded without Duka's knowledge. Conversations between Micky and this Otto Krieg, who was identified in the papers as undercover operative A14-Z11. Who had spent the last year and a half arranging the deal between Duka and his supposed boss, Yuri Astrov.

Saint closed the file and handed it to Livia.

She attacked it eagerly. Saint had brought her up to speed yesterday on what he'd learned from Weeks—she'd been just as anxious as him to get the paperwork the man had promised, to get to the truth about the man who was responsible for their son's death.

Saint turned to the second file.

The outside of this one had a lot more writing on it.

TOP SECRET EYES ONLY UNDERCOVER OPERATIVE PROFILE DESIGNATION: A14-Z11 NSA CODE: AQUA

There were also a lot more pictures inside.

Pictures of Otto Krieg in a marine uniform. In a camouflage outfit. In a photo captioned BOSNIA—1998. In a group shot, next to a smiling Agent Weeks. Huddled in a restaurant booth with Micky Duka and Yuri Astrov.

“That’s him?” Livia whispered, leaning across his shoulder. Howard Saint nodded. “That’s him.”

Quentin Glass leaned in through the window.

“His name is Frank Castle. Senior agent, just got the bureau’s London desk. The name, connections, apartments in Europe—none of it was real. Not even his death.”

Saint was skimming through the memo outlining that particular phase of the operation even as Quentin spoke. He saw the shoot-out between Weeks and “Krieg” had been Castle’s idea—the agent had apparently been worried about two of Astrov’s men, who were supposed to be a little trigger-happy. Castle had thought the sight of blood, blood belonging to one of their own, would make persuading them to lay down their arms easier.

There it was in black and white, then. Any way you looked at it . . . Castle was responsible for what had happened to Bobby.

“It wasn’t real. The shoot-out?” John asked.

“Maybe it was. Maybe he came back from the dead just to die again.” Saint looked up at Quentin. “Where is he now?”

“You have your chance. He’s leaving for England next week, but at this moment . . . he’s at a family reunion in Puerto Rico.”

"You should be there. So you can tell Livia how he died."
Glass nodded, and pulled back from the limo.

"Wait."

Livia leaned forward in her seat.

"The family."

Quentin Glass blinked, as if he hadn't heard her right.

"Livia?"

"The family," she said again, and then lifted her veil.

Her makeup had run. Her eyes were bloodshot and filled with tears. Saint squeezed her hand. "His whole family, Quentin."

Glass's eyes went to Saint, who considered his wife's request.

The whole family. There would be a major, major stink. They couldn't afford it now. The whole FBI thing, the governor's race, business . . .

Then he considered the grave he'd just come from, the look on his wife's face, the endless hours of pain that lay before them, and, most of all, the effrontery of the fuckin' FBI, staging a play that cost his son's life, and nodded.

"Do it," he said to Quentin. "The whole family."

Glass set his jaw, and went to his car.

ELEVEN

At the very bottom of his suitcase, hidden in between two shirts, one of which he'd just pulled out to wear during dinner, Frank Castle was surprised to discover his journal.

He hadn't meant to bring it. Hadn't even recalled taking it out of his attaché since he'd come back from Florida. Maria must have done it, he thought, probably by accident, packed the journal along with his clothes.

It was funny to see it here, to hold it in his hand again. Felt a little unnatural, in a way, because Castle had always kept the journal with his equipment, with whatever gear the particular op he was on at the time required.

The little leather-bound book had gone with him all over the world, in fact, from Baghdad to the Balkans and back again. Now that he thought about it, it had always represented a little piece of home to him—maybe even a little bit of Maria, who'd given it to him in the first place, that first Christmas he'd spent in Iraq. Writing in it, he suddenly realized, had been like unburdening himself to her—even though he'd never once shown her what was inside.

But now he didn't need the little book anymore.

From now on, he was going to be able to confide in Maria firsthand. Take the tube home from work, and talk to her.

He started to put the journal away, and then thought:

Ought at least to say a proper good-bye.

Flipping the little book open, and taking pen in hand, he began to write.

25 June 1630 Hours

Last entry. Has me wondering: is anyone else ever going to read what's in here?

Not if I die in the line of duty, that's for certain. One look at what I've written, the service will burn every page on the spot, deny it ever even existed.

On the other hand . . .

Say I serve out my time, die peacefully in my sleep, this probably ends up mixed in with all my other papers. In which case . . .

Will, maybe there'll come a day when you find it, and start flipping through these pages. Maybe you'll read about some of the things your old man did, and think that you never really knew me, that the man who did the things I write about in here was the real Frank Castle, and the one you grew up with an impostor.

Which, I just this second realized, is the exact opposite of the truth.

These last few days have taught me that I'm only a real person when I'm with you, and your mom. You two complete me-the rest of the time, I might as well be

"Dad!"

Castle looked up and saw his son in the doorway of the bungalow. He shut the journal and stood quickly, blocking Will's view.

"Come on. We're all waiting on you."

"Sorry. Just trying to decide which shirt to wear."

Will looked at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Which shirt? Dad, this is vacation. Who cares which shirt?"

"You're right. Who cares?"

Castle turned his back on Will for a second and pushed the suitcase—the journal now underneath it—up against the wall, making a mental note to come back later, to finish his thoughts and then hide it somewhere safe.

He slipped on his shirt then, and smiled.

“Let’s go,” he said, and led Will out the bungalow door, in the direction of the dinner festivities which, judging from the chorus of voices he could hear in the distance, were already in full swing—his father’s, loudest among them.

“You’ll forgive us, but we started without you,” Frank Sr. said as the two of them found seats: Will next to his mother, Frank on the opposite side of the table, alongside his cousin Tommy Castiglione, a dentist from New Jersey.

“I’ll have to catch up then.” Frank leaned across the table and poured himself a hefty shot of dark island rum. It went down smooth and easy—he raised his empty glass to Maria, who smiled, and poured himself a second, smaller drink.

They clinked glasses across the table.

“Hey. So what’s this about London I hear?” Tommy Castiglione asked.

Frank told him about the new post—the truth. It felt downright weird not to have to invent a cover story, but there was nothing covert about what he was going to be doing in London.

Tommy listened, and then told him he ought to think about having Will’s molars capped, a process that took him several minutes to explain and several more minutes for Frank to understand. In between, Mrs. Gutierrez, who had cooked for the Castle family the last time they were here, whom Frank’s father had hired a year in advance to cook this dinner, served the first course—her famous black bean soup. Which took quite a while to serve, as there were twenty-nine people to be fed.

By the time the soup bowls had come and gone, so had Frank’s second drink. Maria poured him another.

He looked across the table at her and pretended to frown.

“Are you trying to get me drunk, lady?”

She pretended to be shocked.

Right then, the meat pies came out, and the buzz of conversation, at least for a moment, died down.

As Mrs. Gutierrez and her husband cleared the small plates and made ready to serve the main course, Frank Sr. banged on his glass and stood.

“Quiet! Hey, everyone—quiet down a second, will you?”

A few people looked up.

Frank Sr. cleared his throat. “I just want to say—”

“You just want to say you’re drunk!” Betty Castle shouted at her husband. Laughter exploded around the tables—Frank realized his mother was right. His dad’s face was a little flushed—more than a little, in fact. Always a telltale sign.

What was more interesting to Frank was that his mom was clearly in her cups as well. That almost never happened.

He looked across the table at Maria and smiled.

At that second, he realized that despite the number of drinks he’d had—a number he’d completely lost track of—he was stone cold sober. And despite the smell of the *lechón asado*—the barbecued pig—that Mrs. Gutierrez and her husband were now carving and preparing to serve for the main course, the sudden hunger he felt wasn’t for food at all.

He reached across the table and held out his hand.

Maria took it and squeezed tight.

Frank Sr. was still talking.

“But seriously, folks—I’ve always wanted to say that, but seriously, folks—this is the first family reunion we have had in five years, and that’s too long. We don’t see each other like this often enough.”

There were murmurs of assent around the table.

“Here, here,” someone said, and raised a glass, and that set off a fresh round of toasts and drinking.

Frank Sr. waited until it had subsided before continuing.

“Look at us,” he said. “Italian Castigliones, Irish McCareys —”

“And Castles! Don’t forget the Castles!” Will shouted, standing up and raising his own glass, which was full of Coke. At least Frank hoped it was Coke—his son might have been growing up fast, but he was still too young to handle the rum this island produced.

“Of course I won’t forget the Castles,” Frank Sr. shouted back. “That’s my point, exactly. Those two sides of the family, when you put them together . . . you get a boy like my grandson here. You get the future.”

“To the future!” someone said, and Frank Sr. nodded and raised his own glass then. “To the future!”

There was more drinking then. Frank Castle Sr. made another toast, two actually, one to Dublin, one to Rome. Somewhere in the middle of all that, Mrs. Gutierrez and her husband started coming around with plates piled high with meat, and vegetables, and more *empanadillas*. The conversation died out altogether as the eating began in earnest.

Frank caught Maria’s eye and smiled. She smiled back.

He pushed his plate away and stood.

“Excuse me,” he said to no one in particular, and walked off toward the beach.

Not more than thirty seconds later, Maria came up alongside him and slipped her hand in his.

“Your mom said she’d put Will to bed.”

“I think it might end up being the other way around, don’t you think?”

Maria giggled. “Maybe.”

She ran ahead of him and did a cartwheel in the sand. Frank ran up behind her and swept her up in his arms.

They kissed, long and passionately.

Castle broke the embrace—Maria buried her head in his chest. He smelled her hair—a sweet, clean smell, just a hint of perfume, and thought about the cigarettes he’d had to

smoke when he was Otto Krieg. Unfiltered Gauloises, strong and pungent, an odor that had seemed to penetrate not just every article of clothing he'd worn but every pore of his body, so that when he'd lie down to sleep at night, it was the last thing he smelled, and when he woke up in the morning, it was the first thing he tasted. He'd thought he'd never be rid of the smell; it had been on him on the plane back to Washington, on the drive to his house, that first night he'd spent with Maria. Now he realized he hadn't sensed it in days.

"Frank? What is it? What's wrong?"

Castle looked down and saw concern on his wife's face.

"I can't believe I'm here. That I could ever be so lucky. There were times, Maria, I've got to tell you—"

"Frank. Don't."

He shook his head. "I want my son to know me. Christ, I want to know my son."

"I think you're doing just fine now. I've never seen him as happy as he was this afternoon, when the two of you were diving."

"But I've lost so much time. With both of you. And I'm really sorry—"

"Stop." She put a finger to his lips. "I married you. I knew what I was doing. And I'd do it again. You and I . . . we're not lucky. We're blessed."

"I know. I know we are. It's just—"

This time, to shut him up, Maria kissed him. A long slow kiss that he felt all the way down to the core of his being, a kiss that smoldered as she pressed every inch of her body up against his, that had Frank Castle thinking just how goddamn lucky he was to have a wife who was not only smart, and generous, and kind, and a good mother, but one helluva—

Maria drew back from him.

He suddenly realized that somewhere, very close by, a phone was ringing.

“Don’t look at me,” Frank said. He hadn’t even brought his agency cell on this trip.

But Maria wasn’t looking at him at all. She was reaching into her pocket and pulling out her own cell. She studied the caller ID, and frowned.

“Oh, shoot. It’s the damn real estate lady.”

Castle held out his hand.

“Here. I need to talk to her.”

Maria nodded, and handed him the phone.

He spun around and threw it into the ocean.

“Frank!”

“I’ll buy you a new one when we get to London. One that vibrates.”

Her frown turned into a smile then as Frank Castle drew her into his arms, and then down onto the sand.

Dawn found them there, lying still and sated, asleep in each other’s embrace.

TWELVE

"I would fuckin' kill," John Saint said, out of nowhere, "for a good cup of coffee."

Quentin Glass turned to the young man, and smiled what he hoped was an understanding smile.

"Not likely to happen, John. Not in the next few hours, at least. But we'll get your blood flowing soon enough, not to worry."

"It's not my blood I'm worried about," Saint said. "It's my headache. I don't drink enough coffee, I get a fucking caffeine headache. Like right now."

"You want a Coke, boss?" Spoon turned, concern on his face. "We got some Cokes in the cooler."

"Yes." John Saint nodded. "Yes, a Coke would be good."

"Comin' right up," Spoon said, and squeezed past Quentin, heading for the back of the boat.

Jesus Christ. It's *Ted Mack's Amateur Hour* around here, Glass thought disgustedly. He wished John had taken his advice and stayed back on the mainland. Dante and Spoon — all of Howard's employees—were much easier to control (read: order around) when the younger Saint was not present. Still . . .

He expected that getting John sufficiently caffeinated would be about the biggest challenge they would face in the next few hours.

"Hey. Is that it?" Dante, at the wheel of the boat, was pointing off the starboard bow, toward a smudge of black jutting out from the oncoming coastline.

Glass raised his binoculars and squinted through them. The sun was just high enough now that he could make out details—the smudge resolved into a long wooden pier, with a refueling dock at the end of it.

"Yes," he nodded. "That's it. That's De Soto Pier."

Dante smiled and turned the wheel. They shot forward. A second later, another cigarette boat—identical to theirs, long, low, and wickedly fast—came up alongside them.

There were four men in that ship as well. Eight altogether, to handle the unpleasantness before them. They'd started from the Keys the day before yesterday, stopped in the Dominican Republic to refuel, and now they were here.

The coast came into sharper focus. Ahead of them, and slightly to the right, barely visible behind a stand of palms, Glass made out a series of bungalows. Vacation houses. He saw diving gear outside one, tennis rackets on the ground by another. Bathing suits—men's, women's, children's—hung everywhere.

Glass lowered his binoculars and smiled.

A shame, but vacation time was over.

Frank and Maria made their way quietly back to the bungalows, just in time to run into his aunt Louise—his father's sister—who was coming out of the single outdoor shower they all shared, a towel wrapped around her, bleary-eyed with exhaustion.

She glared at the two of them.

"I hate you young people that can drink all night long, and still look fresh as daisies."

Frank smiled. "If it's any consolation, we didn't drink all night long."

"Hmmpphh," his aunt said, and walked off toward the far group of bungalows.

"I think it's going to be a late morning," Frank said, watching her go. "For everyone."

Maria put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll put on some coffee."

"Sounds great. I'll check on Will."

She headed toward the hut that served as their kitchen. Frank walked to his parents' bungalow, where he found Will curled up on the daybed in the room that had been set aside as his father's office.

He watched his son sleep until Maria came in with two mugs of coffee. She handed him one, her hand lingering on his an extra few seconds.

Castle smiled.

"We should have another," he whispered, his eyes on Will.

"I'm ready," his wife whispered back.

"Another what?" Will asked, sitting bolt upright in the bed.

"Another beautiful day," Frank shot back. "Good morning, Will."

"Morning." His son smiled. "Morning, Mom."

Maria leaned forward and rustled his hair.

"All set for the dive?" Frank asked.

"Can't we have breakfast first? I'm starving."

"After last night? You're starving?" Maria asked.

"Yeah. I'm a growing boy."

"That you are." Castle smiled. "How about I whip up some pancakes?"

"Sounds great."

"All right. Just let me go get changed and—"

"Ah." Will snapped his fingers. "I almost forgot."

His son reached under the daybed then, and came up with a ball of wrapping paper. He handed it to Frank.

"What's this?" Castle asked, turning the ball over in his hands.

"It's a present. For your retirement. Grandpa and I picked it up in town last night."

"You went to town last night?" Maria asked.

"Sure. We all did, for dessert." Will frowned. "Grandma said you probably wanted some time alone, so we didn't look for you. Hope you're not mad or anything."

"No." Maria shook her head. "Not mad."

Neither was Frank—but he certainly hoped there'd been a designated driver in the group when they'd gone into Boqueron. The roads around here were terrible.

"Come on, Dad," Will said. "Open it."

"All right." Castle sat down on the bed next to his son, and tore at the paper. There was indeed something hidden inside. Fabric. Black fabric.

He unfolded it and held it up.

It was a black T-shirt, with a white skull—a stylized skull and crossbones, actually—stenciled on the front.

Buccaneer Bay, Frank thought, and looked over at his wife. An expression of concern, mixed with puzzlement, crossed her face.

He felt exactly the same way.

"This is . . . interesting," he said.

"Do you like it?" Will asked.

"I love it." He hesitated a second. "I'm not sure what it means, though."

Will smiled. "It means you're a badass, Dad. Not to be messed with. Even if you are retired. Come on, put it on."

"Maybe I will. Thanks." Frank kissed his son on the forehead. Maria sat down on the bed as well, on the other side of Will, and put her arm around him.

We should have another, Frank said to himself. He must have spoken out loud.

Will made a face. "Do not," he said, shaking his head, "expect me to change any diapers."

There was actually a fence around the property. Glass hadn't been able to see it from the boat, but they ran into it fifty yards in from the shore. A surprisingly substantial chain-link fence, with a padlock at the access gate.

Dante used bolt cutters to shear through the lock. He pushed the gate open, and they all stepped inside, John Saint bringing up the rear, Quentin in the middle of the group.

The men gathered around him. They'd all changed now, were wearing black T-shirts, black pants, shoulder holsters. Not exactly disguises, but on the off chance they were spotted, the clothes would be what people noticed, not their faces.

Besides, the outfits made up a kind of uniform, didn't they? And that could only encourage a more professional frame of mind, a more military cast to the assault.

He split the men into the previously agreed-on attack parties then. Himself, John, Dante, and Spoon were one team; Lincoln, Cutter, and two men they'd picked up down in the Keys courtesy of Morrie Shusheim, who ran a few properties for Howard Saint in the area, made up the second. The killing party, as it were, since, if everything went according to plan, they would do most of the shooting. The indiscriminate shooting, that is.

Glass and his team would be shooting as well, but at some very specific targets.

Both groups started forward now, spreading out across the grounds in tight formation, weapons at the ready.

Glass slipped on his sunglasses and followed.

At the last second Frank decided not to wear Will's gift. Something about the skull just didn't say "family reunion" to him.

He came out of the cabin wearing his favorite old chinos and a raggedy blue work shirt, all set to cook breakfast for his family. For whoever wanted it.

Except his aunt Louise had beaten him to the kitchen. Smoke rose from the stove in front of her. Frank wondered what she was making, caught a faint whiff of something he couldn't really identify, and decided he didn't really want to know.

His aunt wasn't the only one awake now—maybe a dozen people were sitting around the tables that had borne the feast last night. And Tommy Castiglione was behind the bar, mixing himself a drink. He saw Frank, raised his glass, and smiled.

"Hair of the dog that bit ya, Frankie. Want some?"

Castle shook his head.

He looked toward the beach, where two people were tossing a football back and forth. It took him a few seconds

to realize the two people were his wife and son. He waved; Maria saw him and waved back. Will turned and smiled.

“Frank!”

His father stood near the office bungalow, motioning for Frank to join him. Wondering what was up, Frank started walking in that direction.

More people were coming out of their bungalows now. Some still dressed in the clothes they’d worn the night before, some who joined Tommy Castiglione at the bar. One — Rachel McCarey, his cousin Donal’s daughter, who was turning into quite a beauty; in a few more years she’d be perfect for Will—found the controls for the sound system and switched the music back on.

Good God, Frank thought with a smile. The party’s going to start up all over again.

“I don’t know if I ordered enough rum,” his father said, closing the office door behind Frank.

“There may not be enough rum on the island, to tell you the truth,” Frank said, taking a quick look around the office. The room was dominated by two glass weapons cases—a tall one for Frank Sr.’s rifles and shotguns, a smaller one for his pistols.

“Just wanted to talk for a second,” his father said. Frank opened his mouth to ask about what, and then saw something in the pistol case that stopped him in his tracks.

“Wow, Dad. The Colts.” His eyes widened in admiration. “You did something to them.”

He was talking about his father’s prize 1911 Colts, which were front and center in the display case, and shone like newly polished silver.

Frank Sr. smiled. “You could say that. I bored the chamber, polished the ramp, did a custom trigger job, tightened the slide and barrel bushing, and replaced the sights with tritium night gear. They were good before; now they’re nail drivers.”

“Let me see,” he said, opening the case. “I bet they feel —”

“No.” His father reached over his shoulder and shut the case, his voice surprisingly harsh.

Frank turned around. “Dad? What—?”

“Just leave them. You’re finished with guns, thank God.”

Castle looked in his father’s eyes and got it at once.

“This is what you wanted to talk about.”

“That’s right.” Frank Sr. sighed. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to go off like that, but . . . I tell you Frank, I prayed . . . I prayed every night for you to do something else with your life. Be something other than a soldier. I’m just glad it’s finally happened. Not for you, but for my grandson. For Will. I don’t want him to have a room like this. That bayonet—” he pointed at the rifle case. “—I used it. The Colts? I killed with them. That Winchester rifle—”

“You’re not going to tell me you used that, too,” Frank said, a smile on his face.

“No.” His father managed a smile as well. “I didn’t. But some U.S. marshal in Tombstone did—a long time ago.”

“It’s a beautiful weapon,” Frank said. “Just like the Colts.”

“They’re out of service,” his father said. “All of them.”

“Dad . . . listen, I hope Will never has to use a gun just as much as you do. I hope he never has to go to war. But I want him prepared, if that day comes.” Frank put a hand on his father’s shoulder. “You always told me that someone had to do the fighting, and better it be men of honor—”

“Like the Castles,” Frank Sr. said.

“Like the Castles,” he agreed. “Or none at all.”

“I don’t know.” His father shook his head. “That was when the world made sense. Let Will do something better.”

“We’ll see. I plan on leaving it up to him—the same way you left it up to me.”

Frank Sr. eyed him thoughtfully for a second, then nodded. “I suppose. After all . . . you turned out all right.”

“Nice of you to say so. Though I don’t think Mom’s ever forgiven me for not going to law school.”

“She had her hopes, didn’t she?” his father asked, a fullfledged smile breaking out on his face.

“She did indeed,” Frank replied, recalling one particularly contentious evening the summer before his senior year at college, when he and his dad had been in the basement looking over Frank Sr.’s medals. His mom had walked in on them, cradling catalogs from three different area law schools in her arms, at the exact second that the elder Castle was describing, in fairly vivid detail, the first dead body he’d ever seen.

The look on Betty Castle’s face then . . .

Shock mixed with revulsion mixed with disappointment, as she realized that the catalogs she was carrying were wasted effort, that the maxim “like father, like son” had never been more applicable than to her two boys.

Frank had never seen a look like it, before or since.

Right at that second, he happened to glance out the office window. Wouldn’t you know it, there was his mom, dancing with Tommy Castiglione over near the tables from last night. He waved, but she didn’t see him.

Somewhere very close by, a car backfired—several times in rapid succession—and his mother and Tommy, for some reason, fell to the ground.

For a long second, Castle didn’t understand what had happened.

Then blood began to pool around the fallen bodies, and Frank realized the sound he’d heard wasn’t a car backfiring at all.

The world around him seemed suddenly to stop turning.

“Mom?” he whispered. “Mom?”

The backfiring sound started up again, accompanied this time by screams.

THIRTEEN

Maria was on the beach, running after Will's errant throw — short this time, as opposed to the last one, which had been way, way long, so long that it had tumbled into the surf and she'd gotten the legs of her pants wet fetching it—when the men came out of the jungle. Four of them, in black T-shirts and black pants, all wearing sunglasses.

Wrong party, she thought, and was actually about to yell that information up to them when the two in the lead raised weapons—all of them were carrying weapons, she suddenly saw, why were they carrying weapons?—and a split second later, she had the answer as all four started firing. Firing at the people gathered around the tables from last night's party, people eating breakfast, people just sitting around talking . . .

People dancing. Betty and Tommy, who both crumpled to the ground and lay still.

Maria made a noise halfway between a moan and a whimper.

"Mom?" Will stood frozen in place, eyes wide with shock. "Mommy?"

Frank had told her what to do in situations like this. They'd gone over it, time and time again. How to handle yourself in an emergency.

But when she opened her mouth to speak, no words came out.

Quentin Glass stepped out of the jungle and smiled.

Not ten seconds into the attack, and full-fledged panic had erupted already. People were screaming, shouting, begging, crying, in general running around like chickens whose heads had been cut off.

Glass shook his head. He hoped if he had the misfortune to die by violence, he would at least go with his dignity intact. These Castles . . . he was surprised, frankly.

Supposedly, there were military men in the family. They, at least, should know the proper way to meet your maker.

Movement to his left caught his attention. Glass turned, and saw a half-dozen people had burst out of the compound, heading toward a group of vehicles parked near the road.

Dante and Spoon stepped out from their positions then, directly in front of the would-be escapees, and raised their weapons.

Shooting fish in a barrel, Glass thought, as the sound of automatic weapons fire filled the air again.

John Saint stepped up alongside him.

"How's your headache?" Quentin asked.

"Good. Much better, thanks for asking. Any sign of him?"

"Not yet. But—"

There was a sound like thunder. It came from a small bungalow set back perhaps fifty feet from the party area.

A split second later, one of Shusheim's men flew out of the bungalow door and landed flat on his back, a gaping hole in his chest.

"I suspect that's our Mr. Castle now," Glass said.

"Yeah. I suspect you're right."

Glass and John Saint raised their weapons then, and stepped forward to join the party.

He would not allow himself to think who, or why. There would be time for that later—recriminations, retribution, all of it. He would call in every favor he was owed, use every connection he had, pick the brains of every junkie, criminal, and terrorist on the planet to find out who had done this thing.

Right now, Frank Castle had only one thing on his mind: survival. Maria's, and Will's, and whomever else he and his father could rescue.

Neither man had spoken a word since Betty Castle had fallen. His father had simply blinked, then turned away from the window to the weapons case he'd locked only seconds

earlier. He'd handed Frank a shotgun and a box of shells, taken the same for himself, and then joined his son at the window.

Only seconds had passed since the first shots had been fired, but the massacre was in full swing. Frank saw Donal McCarey get shot in the back as he tried to start the motorcycle he'd rented in Boqueron, saw Donal's daughter, Rachel, and his wife, Kathleen, executed as they cowered underneath the party tables, saw Tommy Castiglione's little brother, Dom, cut down as he ran toward the beach.

It was too much. He gritted his teeth and raised his weapon.

His father tapped him on the shoulder and shook his head. Frank Sr. pointed. Two men were moving up the path toward them. When the first cracked the door, and then took a tentative step inside, Frank blew him away.

His father, at the window, fired at the second man. Frank heard that assailant scramble backward, the scuff of his boots against stone, and leaned out the bungalow door.

Weapons fire raked the side of the frame. He stepped back.

"By the grill," his father said, taking up position alongside him. "The propane tank."

Frank nodded, fixing the target in his mind. A second burst of weapons fire came. The instant it stopped, he was moving, the barrel of the shotgun coming up, his finger tightening on the trigger as he stepped forward again and saw the man was just where Frank Sr. had said he would be, the sole of one boot peeking out from behind the propane tank.

He fired.

The tank went up in a ball of flame, taking the screaming, burning gunman along with it.

Castle bent to reload.

"Good start," Frank Sr. said, stepping past him.

Her paralysis had lasted only an instant.

Maria had moved then, tackling her son, taking him down to the sand, putting a finger to her lips even as they fell, making sure he understood that they had to be absolutely quiet, absolutely still. Habit, from the things Frank had taught her, though in this instance there was little danger they could make a sound loud enough to attract the attackers' attention, loud enough even to be heard over the constant chatter of gunfire.

Her eyes scanned the beach, looking for shelter. There. A rowboat turned over in the sand.

She pointed the boat out to Will. He shook his head.

"You can do it," she whispered. "Come on."

They ran, staying low. It was only fifty feet from where they'd dropped to the boat, but it felt like a mile, the longest mile she'd ever run.

They reached the overturned craft and scrambled behind it. There was a thick crack in the bottom: Maria peeked out and saw the massacre continuing.

"Mom. What's happening? Why—"

"Shhh," she said. She couldn't afford to stop and think now, the absolute insanity of the moment would catch up to her and she might lose it. She didn't want Will thinking about it either.

What they had to do was get out of here.

Someone screamed. She looked up and saw little Dom Castiglione, five years old, with the same stupid bowl haircut Tommy insisted on giving all his kids, running from the bungalows toward the beach, running directly toward the boat.

A gunman appeared behind him and raised his weapon.

And then all at once, little Dom wasn't running anymore, he was flying through the air, and the top half of his head was missing.

He landed in the sand, flopping down inches away from the hull. Will's eyes went wide, and he made a gagging noise in his throat.

“Shhh,” Maria said. “Oh, honey, God please be quiet.”

She covered his mouth with one hand and turned his head away from the bloody mess. Two more men stepped forward from the jungle.

She knew instantly from their posture, the way they carried themselves, that these two were in charge, the brains of the operation, if mindless slaughter like this could be said to have any brains at all.

One of them—a younger man, his hair slicked back in an almost comically typical Guido hairstyle—raised a hand to his brow and scanned the area. Then he shook his head.

“Find his wife and son!” he shouted.

At which point Maria’s heart leapt into her throat, and she thought: Frank. Oh God, Frank, wherever you are, please help me.

Castle ran, a step behind his father, through the awful, blood-soaked landscape.

He forced his eyes not to linger on any one corpse, except to identify it, to make sure that neither his wife nor son lay among the dead. He’d seen them last heading for the beach — maybe, he thought, they’d managed to escape already. Maybe the attackers had gone right by them, and Maria and Will had snuck past. Maybe . . .

“Frank.”

His father’s voice brought him back to the here and now.

“Careful,” Frank Sr. said.

He nodded, suddenly aware that the gunfire had stopped and that they were out in the open, dangerously vulnerable. Stupid. They weren’t going to be able to rescue anyone if they were dead. Stupid of them to charge right out, he should have—

He sensed movement behind him then, and spun around just as a man stepped out from behind the cinder-block firepit Mrs. Gutierrez’s husband had built last night, for the dinner that already seemed to belong to another lifetime,

and the man already had his weapon out and aimed not at him but Frank Sr., and—

Gunfire exploded.

The elder Castle screamed and went down.

“No!” Frank yelled, and started to squeeze the trigger of his own weapon. Then he heard a sound from his left, and he swung his shotgun around just in time to smash the barrel full force into the skull of another man who was charging at him, knife drawn, but even as that man fell, he heard footsteps from behind.

Something thin and unbearably sharp cut into his throat, and, all at once, he couldn’t breathe.

Wire. Steel wire, slicing into his neck, cutting off his oxygen.

He gasped and slammed his right elbow back into his attacker’s gut and caught bone, not the soft solar plexus he’d been going for. He drew his elbow forward again, and felt the man behind him shift position slightly, anticipating the blow. Castle shifted his own weight then, intending to throw the man over his shoulder, but as he turned, his foot slipped in something, blood he supposed, and his knee buckled; the man pulled the wire even tighter around his neck, digging his elbows into Frank’s back for leverage.

Damn it. Castle choked, and saw stars.

What to do.

“You’re dead, motherfucker,” the man whispered in his ear, and then exhaled sharply.

All at once the pressure on his neck let up.

His attacker slumped over, a dead weight on Frank’s back. Castle pried the man’s fingers loose from the wire, and he slid to the ground.

There was a knife in the man’s back.

Frank Sr., one arm hanging limply at his side, the other pressed to his chest, where blood—ungodly quantities of dark red blood—stained his shirt, looked into his son’s eyes, and smiled.

“Okay,” his father managed. “Okay, Frankie. Go get the rest of ‘em.”

And he toppled to the ground then, eyes suddenly vacant.

“Dad!” Frank Castle screamed. “Dad!”

FOURTEEN

Maria was gauging the distance they'd have to run when she heard her husband scream, and the faint hope she'd been nursing in her heart—that Frank would appear, suddenly, magically, jump in to somehow save the day—shriveled then and died within her.

She blinked away tears.

"Mom?" Will was looking up at her. "What was that?"

"I don't know," she lied. "What I do know is we have to get out of here. Now."

"It's too far."

"It's the only chance we have," she said, turning again to look toward the Jeep. It was parked down the beach away from the bungalows, on an unpaved access drive that skirted the compound before joining up with the main road. It was barely visible from their vantage point, and entirely invisible, she hoped, from the bungalows behind them.

They'd rented it first thing day before yesterday, on arrival in Boqueron. It, and the attached fishing trailer she'd insisted on getting. Which, assuming they reached the Jeep safely, was going to make driving it a hell of a lot more difficult.

Why did I make Frank get that stupid thing, she thought. He'd told her the odds were they wouldn't get out to the bay, not with all the diving they were going to do, but she'd insisted, and he'd given in, no, not given in, that wasn't the way their relationship worked, he'd done it for her, and damned if he wouldn't have found a way, even with all that diving, to get out into the ocean at least once before they left here for London and the job that was going to mean he came home to her and Will every night. No more sleeping in bed alone, no more renting DVDs to watch by herself, no more dealing with Will's friends and friends' parents, and

after-school activities like her divorced friends did, no more —

“Mom.” Will tugged on her sleeve, and pointed.

Two of the men in black were beginning to walk down toward the beach, poking at fallen bodies, peering around rocks, clearly looking for survivors.

They had to go now, she realized, or not at all.

“I’m going to count to three,” Maria said. “Then we’re going to run to that Jeep, okay?”

Will was suddenly crying.

“What about Dad?”

Maria forced herself to lie again. “Dad’ll be okay. You have to do what I tell you, honey. Promise?”

He nodded. “Promise.”

“Good.” She took a second look back at the approaching men—who hadn’t turned their way yet, thank God—and began to count, her voice quivering, barely audible to her own ears.

She ran on two, dragging Will along with her.

Finger on the trigger of his AK-47, Quentin Glass stepped quickly around the corner of the main bungalow, prepared to shoot at anything that moved.

Nothing did.

He lowered his gun. Just bodies and blood, plenty of each. Including Morrie Shusheim’s two men, one of them burned black on the lower half of his body and still smoking. Glass shook his head. Shusheim had said he was giving them his best men, and he’d definitely charged them for such, but seeing these two, dead like this, he had to wonder. He’d have to talk to Howard, see if they should make a stink about not getting their money’s worth.

On the other hand, there was Lincoln, lying still on the ground, and Lincoln was as good as they came. Glass bent and checked the man’s pulse—still alive, but down for the count, apparently. If Castle had handled him so easily,

perhaps they didn't have a case. Something to consider, afterward.

John Saint came up behind him, wearing a frown.

"Where the hell . . ." Saint shook his head. "He was right here a second ago."

"Ran off, most likely," Glass replied. "No sign of his wife and kid yet?"

Again, Saint shook his head.

It was a mystery all right. Where had the man gone? The main point here was to kill him, not his relatives; it was all well and good that they'd taken care of the family members, but he could not go back to Howard and Livia and tell them their primary target had escaped.

He stepped out onto the blood-stained patio and surveyed the compound. Bodies, bodies, and more bodies. Bodies on the volleyball court, bodies on the dunes, Dante and Spoon down on the beach, searching for survivors, and—

Ah.

Two people running away. A woman and a boy.

"John," he said, tapping Saint on the shoulder.

The man turned to see where he was pointing, just as Castle's wife and son reached a parked vehicle—a Jeep—that had been hidden behind an outcrop of jungle.

The sound of the engine starting up reached their ears.

Simultaneously, the two of them raised their weapons and broke into a jog.

He was moving in the shadows.

There weren't many, this time of morning, so he had to move slowly, much slower than he would have liked, but Castle hadn't heard gunfire for almost a minute now, which he hoped was a good sign. He hoped it meant that Maria and Will, at least, had gotten away, that someone would live past this awful day. Maybe, after he killed every one of these attackers, after he found out who they were and why they'd done this thing, he would be able to join them someplace safe. Maybe.

Part of him didn't want to.

Because this was all his fault. He knew that for a fact, simple process of elimination—no one hired assassins to go after, say, a dentist because their fillings broke.

Castle almost laughed out loud at the thought. What was it Tommy had wanted Will to do—that's right, get his molars sealed. Maybe this was all because the seal on some other kid's molars went bad, the kid's mom freaked out, hired somebody to take it out on Tommy.

He pictured that mom then, a soccer mom, in her minivan, pulling up to some deserted street corner, and a guy in a black T-shirt strolling over to her window, and her taking out her checkbook, asking who should she make it out to. . . .

No. Castle bit his lip hard, forced himself to concentrate.

He couldn't afford to lose it now.

Everything depended on him. They were all alone here—deliberately isolated from the town and everyone in it. The only people who even knew they were here right now were Mr. and Mrs. Gutierrez, who were coming back this afternoon to cook tonight's dinner, but that wasn't for—he looked at his watch—a couple hours yet, at the earliest.

The Rolex. Jimmy Weeks. Shit, he'd never called him. Imagine if he had. Imagine if Weeks were here now. The two of them together again . . . that would have been something. Just like in Khafji.

Footsteps sounded. Castle peered around the corner and saw two men running away from him, down toward the beach. He heard a car start up and tracked the sound in that same direction.

"Maria," he whispered, hope filling his heart as he recognized his wife and son.

He broke from the shadows, sprinting after the two men in black, raising the shotgun and sighting down the barrel even as he ran, noting that something about one of the attackers—the younger one—seemed somehow familiar. If the man

would just turn his head so Castle could get a look at him full on, he could—

Someone ran into him from behind. The impact stunned him—his weapon flew from his hands, and he hit the ground hard with his chest, managing to turn just enough at the last second to catch the ground with part of his shoulder, too, so that he could use the momentum to roll to his feet.

As he turned to face his attacker, he heard the gunfire begin.

Maria slammed the gas pedal down, and the Jeep shot forward.

In the passenger mirror, she saw four men chasing them—the two who'd been searching the beach, and two others, including the younger one who'd been looking for her and Will before. Not good. All had their weapons out, and pointed straight at the Jeep. Worse.

"Down!" she yelled, pressing Will under the dashboard as the clang of metal on metal—bullets striking somewhere on the Jeep, or the trailer, she hoped to God nowhere critical—filled the air.

Maria looked up again just in time to see Frank Sr.'s bright red pickup, parked half on, half off the road, looming directly in front of them.

She spun the wheel hard to the left. The Jeep struck a fallen log—she bounced up and down on the seat. Will's head clipped the underside of the dashboard.

The trailer fishtailed behind them, slamming into the pickup with a resounding clang. At that second, she realized just how hard it was going to be to maneuver down these little roads with it attached; it was going to be like trying to run while carrying a sack of cement, but she didn't have any choice in the matter. She had to reach Boqueron. There were people there, though she wasn't exactly sure what ordinary people could do to help; she needed the army. No, what she needed were the Marines, and thinking that, she thought of Frank, but thinking of Frank was not something

she could afford to do at this second—she would lose it—so she shut down her mind entirely.

And glanced in the rearview mirror, where she saw something that made her blood run cold.

Frank Sr.'s pickup, rounding the corner behind them. Two of the black-clad men in the cab, the other two riding in the truck bed behind them, rifles out and pointed right at them.

They were gaining.

"Mom?" Will asked from the floor. "Where are we going?"

"Hang on, honey." She put the pedal to the floor. "Mom's going to find help."

Glass turned in his seat and passed his spare magazines through the window, placing them carefully in Dante's outstretched hands. The truck was bouncing up and down like a jackhammer; he made sure not to let go until the man had a firm grip. The last thing they could afford right now was to lose ammunition. Dante and Spoon had gone through every magazine they'd brought already, and Castle was still somewhere out there, loose, apparently with weapons of his own.

John Saint, in the driver's seat, apparently shared his concern.

"Find Castle!" he shouted to Cutter, who had come up alongside them, running full out in an attempt to leap into the truck bed.

The man nodded and dropped back.

Glass looked at his watch. Twenty-five minutes since they'd landed on the island, fifteen since they'd begun the operation. The schedule called for them to be back aboard the boats and out of range by one P.M. Not only were they running out of ammo, he thought, they were running out of time.

It was the man he'd knocked out with the shotgun before. Back for seconds. He didn't have time.

"Get the fuck out of my way, and I'll let you live," Castle said.

The man sneered and drew a knife. He circled, holding the weapon at his side, his eyes giving away nothing.

Not a complete amateur, then, Castle thought.

Right then he heard the Jeep roaring off. Go, honey, he urged silently, risking a glance in its direction. At that moment his dad's pickup truck came to life and started after it.

Shit. He really didn't have time for this.

The man lunged. Frank stepped back out of range, barely avoiding the blade.

"You better pay attention, Frankie. Otherwise . . ." The man smiled and waved the blade again.

He called me Frankie, Castle thought; at that second, the last, tiny shred of doubt in his head about whom the attack was directed at and why vanished.

My family, he thought, and as the man came at him again, something inside him snapped.

Instead of lunging back, out of the way, Castle lunged forward, turning to the side.

He grabbed the man's wrist and twisted. He heard bone crack, and thought: Mom.

The man screamed.

Castle kned him in the groin. The man gasped, and Castle kned him again, in the solar plexus this time, and again, he heard the satisfying crack of bone.

Dad.

The man fell to the ground. Castle scooped up the knife he'd dropped and brought it to the side of the man's throat. Pressed.

Donal.

A drop of blood appeared. Seeing it, Castle blinked and came back to his senses.

What was he doing?

His head snapped around. The two vehicles—Maria's Jeep and his dad's pickup—were barely visible on the main road.

He scanned the compound, and his eyes fell on Donal's body and the motorcycle lying next to it.

He sprinted toward the bike, scooping up a revolver as he ran.

The second she saw the sign—BOQUERON, 2 KM—Maria smiled.

We're going to make it, she thought. Two kilometers, that wasn't much more than a mile. The truck was gaining, the truck was close, but the road was too narrow for them to try to pass, and the trailer too big for them to shoot around or over with any kind of accuracy.

And there was a police station in Boqueron. She'd only just remembered it—a little building, not much more than a hut, really, right at the start of the little commercial strip as you first came into town, Maria would find a way to get Will and herself into that building, among whatever officers were there, even if she had to drive the Jeep right through the front door to do it.

She looked up the road. Off to her left was the ocean, and coming up, just ahead, the pier—De Soto Pier. God, had it only been yesterday when Frank and Will were diving off it? She'd thought that was dangerous, ha-ha; Will could do as much diving as he wanted from now on as far as she was concerned, and she reached down to touch her son's hair as the road curved to the right at the pier entrance, a long, sweeping curve sharp enough, she suddenly realized, to give the men behind them a clear view of the Jeep.

She ducked, just as glass shattered, and the cab filled with the sound of metal on metal, the thud-thud-thud of bullets hitting upholstery, a muffled explosion from outside the Jeep, and a horrendous screeching sound, metal scraping on pavement—

All at once, she lost control of the vehicle.

The tires, she thought. Oh, God. They'd shot out the tires.

She slammed on the brakes as the Jeep started to roll.

Donal must have been crazy when he rented this cycle.

For one thing, it was a monster. They didn't make them like this anymore, and for good reason—the bike was too big for most people to handle. Castle, who'd driven almost every class of bike and ATV that had ever been built, was having trouble keeping it on the road. Which was a whole nother problem, the road, potholes the size of garbage can lids; he needed to concentrate 100 percent on the surface in front of him, which was just not possible because he needed to keep an eye on the road ahead as well, an eye out for the truck chasing his wife and son, and for the gunmen in it.

And then there were Will and Maria, who were really all he could think about at the moment.

The smile on his son's face as he broke the water after the free ascent yesterday. As he gave Frank that stupid T-shirt. The look in Maria's eyes as they'd made love on the beach last night. As she handed him that cup of coffee this morning . . .

As she'd raised up on her toes to kiss him that day he'd left for Kuwait, her bangs hanging down over her forehead, her eyes misting over with tears.

"You're my hero, Frank Castle," she'd said.

He heard her voice in his head now, over and over again, as he gunned the cycle forward.

Glass smiled as John Saint backed the truck down the road.

The Jeep and trailer had rolled over at least six times. So much for Castle's wife and son. The thing they had to do now, the thing John was, in fact, doing, was get turned around and hustle back to the compound. Hopefully, Cutter had at least found Castle by now, if not taken care of him. He wished again that John had stayed back on this mission; if he had been here alone, in charge, Glass would have split their forces differently, would have had Dante or Spoon or maybe even both of them stay back with Cutter to take care of their primary target, and he would have finished off the woman and child himself.

But, of course, after what had happened to T.J., no way were Dante and Spoon leaving John exposed. They were probably under direct orders from Howard not to do that, in fact.

Glass sighed. Well. They'd just have to make do. At least there was plenty of ammunition left for Castle, since it hadn't taken more than half a clip to take out the Jeep and its passengers.

He looked at the vehicle again. It had come to rest directly at the end of the pier, blocking the way out onto it; he wondered if he should send Dante or Spoon to make sure that neither mother nor child had survived when a head popped up from behind the overturned vehicle. The woman's head.

A second later, both she and the boy were running out onto the pier, waving their arms, screaming for help.

"For God's sake." Glass shook his head in disgust. He stuck his head out the window and turned back to Dante. "Go get them, will you?"

"No. Hold on." John Saint stopped the pickup, drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "I got a better idea."

"John." Glass shook his head. "We really don't have time. Let's just—"

"Hey, we're low on ammo, right?" Saint said, turning them so they were pointing directly at the wreck.

"Yes, but—"

"So I'm gonna save us a few rounds," Saint said, and he gunned the vehicle forward.

Just in the nick of time, Glass realized what he was intending to do, and he put his hands on the dashboard, bracing for impact.

"Help!" Maria screamed. "Help us!"

She ran, eyes scanning the pier wildly, searching for any signs of life, anyone at all. How was it possible that the entire dock, which only yesterday had been alive with

tourists and natives, musicians and street vendors, was now completely and totally deserted?

Even the bait shop was closed—she remembered coming here five years ago, for the last reunion; it had been open at six in the morning, every morning. Why—

A huge crash came from behind her.

She turned around and saw the pickup pulling back from the Jeep, getting set to ram it a second time.

“Mom.”

Maria stopped in her tracks. Will was pointing to the end of the dock, the cut on his head where he’d struck it on the window frame as they’d climbed out of the Jeep still bleeding. Surviving that accident had been a miracle.

But now, it seemed, they needed another.

She looked where Will was pointing—to the ramp at the very end of the pier, the one that led down to the refueling dock—and her heart leapt.

The launch Frank Sr. had pointed out yesterday, the one he’d intended the boys to use for their dive, was still moored there.

“Run, baby,” she said, grabbing her son’s hand. “Run as fast as you can.”

They rammed the Jeep a second time—Glass heard Dante curse out loud behind him, heard something slam into the roof of the cab, and smiled, probably the man’s head, or some other body part—and then suddenly the way to the pier was clear.

Halfway down the long wooden dock, he saw Castle’s wife and kid, running toward the end of the pier. Correction. You couldn’t exactly call what they were doing running, it was more like a series of controlled stumbles.

He turned to John Saint, who was smiling.

“Cake,” Howard’s son said, and dropped the pickup into gear.

Will tripped. Maria caught him even as he was falling, helped him stay on his feet.

“Come on,” she said. “We can do it.”

Her son nodded, and started running again.

All at once, she felt the pier beneath them vibrate, and she turned.

The truck was coming.

She faced forward again and stumbled herself. Now it was Will’s turn to help her rise.

She’d thought, prayed, hoped against hope, that their pursuers would stop and come after them on foot, thinking that the pier couldn’t hold the big pickup’s weight, which of course it could, she’d seen a big tractor trailer on it yesterday, resupplying the refreshment stand. Where the hell was that trailer now?

The vibrations grew stronger.

What kind of monsters would do this? she thought. Kill innocent people, innocent children, what possible reason—

She choked out a sob.

The entrance to the ramp was so close. A hundred feet away. They could do it. They had to do it.

Will stumbled again. Again, she caught him, put her arm around his shoulder, and drew him close.

He looked up at her, chest heaving, gasping for air, and said: “Mom?”

“I’m right here, baby,” she said, tears starting to fall. “I’m right here with you. Always.”

The roar of the pickup filled her ears.

FIFTEEN

Frank came around a long sweeping curve and saw, lying just off the road, the Jeep, smashed and mangled almost beyond recognition. He roared to a stop next to it, ran to the cab, his heart pounding with fear.

There was no one inside. Where—

He looked around, scanning the jungle, the beach, the pier. . . .

Then he frowned. There was his father's pickup, the one that had been chasing Maria and Will, at the very end of the dock, just now coming to a stop.

Something—two somethings—lay on the pier between the truck and him.

"No," he said. "No."

Frank Castle began to run then, an unbearable, unthinkable certainty growing in his mind with every step.

Saint pointed off the end of the pier.

"Quentin. Those are the boats, am I right?"

Glass squinted and saw Saint was indeed correct. Off in the distance, moored to a small thin spit of land, the two cigarette boats they'd used to mount the assault bobbed in the ocean.

"We could swim to them from here, I bet. Whaddaya think?"

Glass shook his head. "Not a good idea. John, we need to get back to the compound. Find Castle, take care of him, and get out of here."

"Right. You're right, Quentin." Saint smiled. "That's why my dad pays you the big bucks, isn't it? 'Cause you're always right."

Saint nodded. "That's one of the reasons." Another being that, unlike you, my young friend, I know my ass from my elbow . . . but of course he didn't say that out loud.

Saint dropped the truck into reverse, turned to check his mirrors, and smiled. "Hey look who just showed up, Quentin," he said.

Glass turned to look and then smiled himself.

Goddamn if it wasn't Frank Castle, come to join the party.

He dropped to his knees, and took them into his arms.

They felt so small, so light. Like nothing at all.

But they had been his entire world.

Why had it taken him so long to see that? Why had he wasted so much time, fighting other people's battles, and let the days, the months, the years pass by apart from them? Years he could never have back now.

Maria's hair had fallen down over her face. He brushed it back and touched her cheek.

The voices in his head were too much to bear.

"You're my hero, Frank Castle."

"It means you're a badass."

"You turned out all right."

"You're my hero, Frank Castle."

"We ought to have another."

"You married a Castle, honey."

"You get the rest of 'em, Frankie."

"You're my hero."

He heard another voice then, behind those voices, a voice that grew louder and louder until it was the only thing he could hear. This voice spoke no words, though—it simply made a single, continuous guttural sound. A scream.

It was him, Frank Castle realized. He was screaming.

His wife and son, his mother and father, his entire family, all were dead, and he was screaming because it was his fault.

He became aware that the pier beneath him was vibrating.

Castle looked up. The pickup truck had turned around and was bearing down on him now. There were four men in it—the two riding in the bed had weapons out, pointed at him.

He had a weapon, too, Castle remembered.

He laid his wife and son down gently on the dock.

Maria. Will.

He rose to his feet, cocked the trigger, and charged.

"The guy is fucking certifiable," Saint said. "Look at him."

Glass was looking. Castle did indeed look certifiable, was certainly behaving that way; this was without a doubt the first time he'd seen anyone attack a pickup truck—but just because he was crazy didn't make him any less dangerous.

"Shoot," he yelled, turning so Dante and Spoon could hear him. "Shoot him, damn it!"

They *were* shooting, he realized. The pier around Castle splintered even as he watched. Glass reached for his own weapon. But the man was still coming, firing as he charged, taking aim directly at—

The windshield shattered.

"Fuck," John Saint said. "Hang on!"

The truck swerved, and Glass did indeed hang on, as best he could.

Maria, he thought, or screamed; he couldn't tell which. Will.

The truck was coming at him fast, the men in back firing, the man in the passenger seat drawing his own gun now, the driver's mouth open in surprise, looking suddenly, hauntingly familiar, and Castle thought—

Him. Shoot him—and his arm swiveled; he sighted down the barrel, looking right into the driver's eyes, and saw the man curse and turn the wheel.

The truck swerved hard to the right, flew past him, missing by inches, and slammed into the concrete pilings at the end of the pier.

Castle strode quickly toward the wreck, wondering if he had enough bullets left in the revolver to kill all four men. Probably not, but that was just as well.

He'd prefer to use his hands, anyway.

The two men who'd been riding in the bed both lay still in it now. The driver was shaking his head, trying to clear it. The man in the passenger seat was trying to open his door, but was not succeeding. It looked to Castle as if the frame was bent.

Take care of them first, he wondered, or the other two? The ones in back, he decided, were just soldiers, following orders. Kill them quick, use the bullets. Take your time with the other two.

As he was deciding that, one of the men in the back suddenly rolled over, raised a weapon, and shot him.

He felt the bullets tear into his shoulder and leg; then he was kneeling on the ground, vaguely aware of the physical pain, but what the fuck did physical pain matter to him now.

He raised his revolver and squeezed the trigger.

But the only sound that came out of the gun was a single, pitiful click.

Sonuvabitch. He'd used up all the bullets.

All right. He'd have to do this the old-fashioned way, by hand. First things first—on your feet, soldier.

He used an old trick from his Delta training—the only worthwhile thing that prick Cauley had ever taught him. Project past the pain, to your opponent. Visualize the attack.

Castle visualized himself rising up, walking over to the man who'd shot him, and squeezing his throat till his eyes popped out of his head.

But his leg wouldn't obey. It buckled beneath him, and then he felt pain—a sudden, stabbing pain.

His vision blurred.

"Sayonara, Charlie." The man who'd shot him stepped forward and raised his weapon again.

No. It couldn't end like this. He'd taken on the best soldiers in the world, the most lethal terrorists out there, the cream of the scum, like Litton used to say. He couldn't die on a pier in the middle of nowhere. No. Maria. Will.

"You're my hero, Frank Castle."

Get up hero, he told himself. Get up and live.

“Hey, hold on, Dante. I wanna do this asshole, right?”

Castle heard a door open, heard footsteps coming toward him. He tried to focus—was able to make out two figures coming toward him, one on either side. Flanking maneuver. They would attack together, so . . .

He flipped the gun in his hand around so that he had the grip to use as a weapon.

Someone kicked it out of his hand. Before he could think of what to do next, he was being lifted up off his feet, two sets of arms holding him, yanking him hard in one direction and then the other. And then no one was holding him.

His back smashed into something—the dock railing— and he heard wood crack. Then he was falling.

A thousand-pound weight slammed into him from behind, knocking all the air out of his chest. Everything went black, and he lay still for a moment.

Voices from above reached him.

“. . . screwing around, and do this quick.”

“Quentin. Relax. Quick is a relative term, my friend. We can spare an extra minute.”

Castle opened his eyes. He was lying spread-eagle on the refueling dock. Every bone in his body felt as if it was broken. He tried to move, but the pain was too much. Too much.

The sun beat down on him. He blinked, and lay back.

“You’re my hero, Frank Castle.”

No, he thought. I’m no one’s hero. I fucked up so bad, honey. I’m so sorry.

Water lapped against his arm. The ocean—he could smell it, mixed in with the odor of gas from the pump nearby. Except, a second later, the gas smell became overpowering, and he realized that he wasn’t just smelling it. . . . He was lying in it.

He pushed onto his elbows and saw an overturned drum of gas on the dock ten feet away from him; the man from

the passenger seat stood behind it, regarding him impassively.

Castle bit back a groan and pushed himself onto his feet. He swayed a moment, trying to gain his balance.

The driver was walking down the ramp from the pier to the loading dock, walking toward him, a broad smile on his face, a pistol in his hand. It was the first really good look Castle had gotten at the man.

He blinked.

It was Bobby Saint.

An instant later, he realized that it wasn't.

It was Saint's twin, John. He'd read about that; Howard Saint had had two sons.

Howard Saint. That was who—

The man stopped a yard away from him.

"My mother and father send their regards, Otto. Frank. Whatever the fuck your name is." He raised the gun. "Sorry to tell you, chief—this time, they're not blanks."

He fired.

The bullet hit Castle square in the chest.

He gasped and staggered backward. Fell to his knees, right in the exact same spot from which he'd just gotten up.

The man from the passenger seat walked to the refueling pump and turned it on. He threw the hose on the ground—gasoline spewed everywhere, flooding what parts of the dock weren't soaked with fuel already.

Then he joined Saint and the others, ascending the ramp, heading back toward the pier.

Castle tried to focus. He had to get off the pier, too.

Only problem was, his body refused to move.

He blinked and looked up at the men who'd killed him. Who'd killed his family. All because of a stupid accident that Castle would have done anything in his power to avoid.

From the pier above, John Saint waved down to him, then shouted something, a shit-eating grin on his face. The

passenger knelt down next to the ramp, which all at once erupted in flames.

Get up, Castle. Get up or die.

The fire surged toward him, faster than he could conceive of moving. He could feel the heat from it, getting closer, and braced himself.

It would be over in an instant, he thought. A very painful instant, but he'd felt pain before. He'd been tortured before, and the trick was to keep your mind someplace else.

He put his where he always did. With Maria, right before he'd left for Desert Shield, the bus door open behind him, the engine running, tears in her eyes as she had looked up at him and said, "You're my hero, Frank Castle."

The flames leapt toward him, brushing past the gas pump. And the world exploded.

"Sonuvabitch," John Saint yelled. "Did you see that fucker fly?"

He was pointing down at the refueling dock, or what was left of the refueling dock, which had just blown sky-high, taking the gas pump, the little motorboat moored next to it, and Frank Castle right along with it.

"Like a fuckin' Frisbee, boss," Spoon said.

"Like fuckin' Superman," Dante chipped in.

"Not Superman. Just another dead Fed." John Saint smiled and clapped Dante on the back. "That was good shooting before. Good work, everybody."

Glass frowned. "I think," he began, "it might not be a bad idea to find the body. Make sure that—"

"Ain't no body left, Quentin. Look at that fire."

Glass looked. It was a big fire, indeed, but still . . .

"That's thirsty work. I need a fuckin' beer, is what I need," John Saint said. "Now where can I get a beer around here, hey?"

"Maybe back at that other place," Dante suggested. "They had food there."

“Yeah. That’s a good idea,” John Saint replied. “We gotta go back there anyway, get Cutter. Right?”

The three men started walking toward the truck. Glass continued to study the fire. As he watched, the refueling dock—what was left of it—slid into the water and disappeared from sight.

For once, he decided, John Saint was right. Castle was dead. No doubt about it.

But as the truck pulled back down the ramp, he continued to scan the ocean. Just in case.

The water was warm, and pink. Pink with his blood. Warm from the fire that raged above on the surface. He couldn’t swim through that fire, and he couldn’t swim around it.

All he could do now was die.

Frank Castle sank like a stone to the bottom of the ocean, too numb to feel anything at all, save his lungs, gasping for oxygen.

“You get the rest of ’em, Frankie.”

I tried, Dad. I swear I tried.

Something tugged at his belly. He looked down and saw a nurse shark—just a little one, not much more than a few feet long—helping itself to a piece of skin dangling from his chest. He swung awkwardly at it, and the shark retreated, its eyes never leaving his for a second.

Dead man’s eyes. The skull on the shirt his son had given him.

“It means you’re a badass, Dad. Not to be messed with.”

But they’d done just that; messed with him, messed him up as if he was nothing at all. Howard Saint and his kid and their goons. They’d killed his whole family, and there was nothing he could do about it. Not now, not ever.

Castle saw it all happen again: saw his mother fall to the ground, saw his father shotgunned from behind, watched Tommy and Rachel, Dom and Donal, and all the others slaughtered like animals; worst of all, he saw Maria and Will lying still on the pier, limp and lifeless, never to laugh or cry

or kiss or love again. For a final, futile second, anger surged through his body.

What he wouldn't do for one more chance at those bastards. God, he thought. Somebody. Anybody.

His vision blurred and darkened around the edges.

And at that second, the current shifted, and Castle saw something glinting in the water ahead of him. Metal. Round. A cylinder of some kind.

With the last of his strength, with his one good arm, he dragged himself forward to get a closer look.

SIXTEEN

"Come on, move it, get that hunka junk outta here."

Micky Duka rapped on the passenger window of the black Lexus till it rolled down. An ungodly beautiful black woman stared daggers at him.

Christ, he thought. It's Charmaine what's-her-name. Some French name, he couldn't pronounce it, she was on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue this year.

In the driver's seat next to her, an equally good-looking black man—this guy was a model, too, Micky knew that, though he couldn't place him at all—smiled over at Duka, a very fake smile, and said: "We're waiting for a friend."

"Yes," Charmaine said. "So, if you would please stop banging on my window—"

"Sorry," Duka said. "But you gotta move."

The driver kept smiling.

"As I said, we're waiting on a friend. It'll only be a minute. She was coming right out."

"Yeah. You can wait for her over there, okay. Right now, you gotta move. Right now," Duka repeated, casting a nervous glance past the Lexus to the Bentley waiting behind it. Dante, in the driver's seat of the Bentley, was starting to frown.

"Do you know who I am?" the woman asked. "Who this is?" She pointed to the driver.

"You're somebody, yeah. That's great. But I'm somebody, too. I'm the valet captain. That means I'm in charge of keeping the way clear here. And you are blocking the way, *capisce*?"

Charmaine, clearly, didn't *capisce*.

"What's your name, little man?"

"Micky Duka."

"Well, Micky, I'm a personal friend of John Saint's—" The way she said that, Micky had no doubt that Howard's kid

had banged her, good for him “—and he’s certainly going to hear about this from me.”

“Wonderful. You can tell him in a minute, ’cause I see he’s waiting right there. In the Cobra, behind the Bentley. His dad’s Bentley. Howard Saint’s Bentley, which you are blocking at this very minute.”

The driver turned, saw the waiting cars, and his face changed.

Not ten seconds later, the Bentley was at the curb and Micky was opening the passenger door.

Howard Saint was the first one out. He took in the scene in front of the club, smiled at Micky, and then offered a hand to Mrs. Saint.

“Big crowd tonight, Mr. Saint,” Micky said. “You look beautiful, Mrs. Saint. If I may say so.”

Which she did, in a tight black dress that left nothing to the imagination—Christ, if his mom had looked like that, Micky would have had some serious issues, which he did anyway with Livia Saint, on account of the fact that every time she saw him she made a face like she just ate bad clams or something. Like she was about to get sick.

Micky guessed it had something to do with Bobby, even though Mr. Saint had apparently forgiven him for being there when Bobby died, as he’d given Micky this job here. Though sometimes he wondered if Saint hadn’t made him valet captain just to keep him close, keep an eye on him, make sure that he hadn’t really known anything at all about Otto Krieg being a Fed. Saint had certainly watched him carefully the other night when he’d given Micky that little piece of info, and it had been all Micky could do not to shit a brick right then and there, the way that Quentin Glass kept asking, Are you sure, Micky? Are you sure? Take your time. Guy made his skin crawl, Glass did.

The Saints entered the club, arm in arm. The Bentley pulled away from the curb. John Saint pulled in.

“Hey, Micky Duka, Micky Duka, Micky Duka.” Saint tossed him his keys. “How’s it going, my friend?”

John slapped him on the back.

“Good, John. It’s going good. You stayin’ awhile?”

Saint nodded. “Yeah. I am. Gotta little celebration happenin’ tonight, me and the folks.”

Like always, Micky felt weird every time he talked to the guy. The whole twin thing, it was like talkin’ to Bobby all over again, except that John Saint was a raving asshole. He and Glass had been gone for two days now, and Micky hadn’t missed either one of them in the slightest.

“Check out the news, by the way,” John said, slapping a newspaper into his chest.

“News?”

Micky flipped the paper open. Tomorrow morning’s *Tampa Times*. Howard knew somebody, of course—they always got it early.

Duka saw the headline above the fold, and his mouth dropped open. “Holy . . .”

MASSACRE IN PUERTO RICO: U.S. FAMILY GUNNED DOWN IN TERROR ATTACK. He didn’t need to read a word of it to know whose family got massacred, because there were pictures to go along with the article, a half dozen of them. An older man and woman, a couple kids, a good-lookin’ young girl . . .

And Otto Krieg, aka Frank Castle.

The paper slipped from his hands and fell to the ground.

Right at that second, Micky felt as if he’d just eaten some bad clams himself.

Howard Saint raised his glass.

“To Bobby.”

“To Bobby.” Livia, sitting across from him, echoed the toast, as Quentin and John did a split second later.

“To a score settled,” his wife said then, a light burning in her eyes.

Saint clinked glasses with her. Livia looked extraordinary tonight. Micky Duka had practically drooled all over himself helping her out of the car—his wife had, of course, noticed.

“Do you really need that filthy little man anymore?” she’d said as they entered the club. “Can’t you—” She waved a hand. “—make him vanish?”

Saint had only smiled at that—he’d thought about making Duka vanish himself, thought about it more than once over the last couple days, but the man was harmless, after all, not worth killing. Right at this moment, in fact, Saint had had enough of killing.

Puerto Rico had more than sated his thirst for blood.

It was time to turn to other things, things he’d let slide during this last week. Business, for one. Pleasure, for another.

He started to pour himself another glass of champagne and frowned. Empty. He held the bottle up in the air.

Quentin turned in his seat and snapped his fingers. One of the bartenders nodded, and not more than ten seconds later, he was at their table with a fresh magnum. The young man filled glasses all around, bowed, and left.

“John.” Saint leaned forward. “I’m going to want you to spend some time tomorrow with Rebecca. There are some public relations opportunities coming up over the next few weeks, and we need to . . . work on your image.”

He braced himself for the inevitable explosion—there was nothing John Saint hated more than working on his “image”—but to his surprise, his son only smiled.

“Yeah. Sure, Pop. Whatever you say.”

“Good.” Saint nodded. “I’ll have her call and set up a time.”

“Sure, Pop,” John said again.

That was when Saint noticed his son really wasn’t paying attention to him at all; John’s attention was instead focused somewhere else entirely.

Saint turned and saw where.

A striking young blonde woman—Saint thought he recognized her from the last car commercial—was out on the dance floor behind them, beckoning John toward her with every part of her equally striking body.

“John,” Saint began, turning back to the table. “You know that is a very important time—”

“I got it, Pop. Don’t worry. Have her call me, yeah?” He nodded to Livia. “Excuse me, Mom.”

Saint watched his son go, and sighed.

“Don’t be hard on him.” Livia reached across the table and put her hand on his. “Boys will be boys.”

Saint nodded. She was right, of course. He couldn’t expect John to concentrate on business twenty-four hours a day, especially now, although he would have liked—

His train of thought rolled to a stop as Robert Chadwick entered the club, Big Richie Constantine a step behind him.

“Howard,” Quentin said. “Isn’t that—”

“It sure as hell is,” Saint said, rising to his feet and waving to the two men. Constantine took a spot at the bar and waved for Saint to join them.

Saint hesitated a second. This was his club. People came to his table to do business. But this was Big Richie Constantine, a man whose organization ran Miami Beach, a man who was a conduit to a considerable amount of wealth. Wealth that could sew up the primary for Saint even before he announced.

What the hell, he decided. Constantine had come a few hundred miles north. For Saint to walk a few dozen feet to meet him . . .

No big deal.

“Quentin,” he said to Glass. “Would you dance with Livia? I’ll be right back. Darling—you’ll excuse me?”

Leaving his wife in Glass’s good care, he made his way to the bar.

“Robert. And Richie. This is a surprise.”

They all shook hands. Saint motioned the bartender over, ordered drinks all around.

"Nice place you got here, Howard," Constantine said. "Little bit of Miami right here in the boonies. I like it."

The boonies. Saint forced himself to smile.

"We try, Richie."

"You do more than try, Howard," Constantine said. "You succeed. Can't say that about a lot of people in this world. Make something out of nothing."

That was gracious, Saint thought. He was about to say as much when there was a commotion behind him.

He turned and saw the Toros—Mike and Joe—arguing with Cutter, who was on the door tonight. Jesus. Talk about lousy timing . . .

"Excuse me, Richie. Robert." He nodded toward the disturbance and smiled apologetically. "Be right back."

He made his way through the crowd to the club entrance, where he found only Joe Toro waiting for him.

"Hey." Joe smiled. "Howard. Good to see you."

"Joe Toro. What a surprise. Can I get you a drink?"

"I'm all set, thanks." Toro raised a glass he'd been holding by his side. "Heard the news, Howard. Came by to offer our congratulations."

"I appreciate it. I couldn't have done it without you—or Mike." Which was true enough, but this was neither the time nor the place to get into details. "Where is he, by the way? Your brother?"

"He's dancing. Gonna join him myself in a moment— soon as I finish my drink." He took another sip, let his eyes wander around the club. "Now this is class. This is real class, Howard."

"Glad you like it, Joe. Make yourself at home," Saint said, not meaning a word of it as his eyes scanned the floor for Mike Toro. He wanted these two out of here, now, so he could get back to—

Saint cursed inwardly. There was Mike, out on the dance floor, just like Joe had said.

The other Toro had apparently decided to make himself at home, as well. With Saint's wife.

It was always good to spend time with Livia, and even though Quentin Glass preferred dancing with men—really, boys, if you got right down to it—he'd actually been enjoying the feel of her in his arms, sleek and hard in some places, soft and sweet-smelling in others, when all of a sudden he'd smelled cigar smoke and felt a hand on his shoulder. He'd turned to see—of all people—Mike Toro.

"Hey, Quentin Glass. How's it going? Hope you don't mind," and before Glass could think of a response, Toro had cut in on him and taken Livia in his own arms.

Her eyes clouded over with fury.

"Quentin? Who is this?"

Toro answered before he could. "Who am I? I'm Mike. Mike Toro. You're Livia; this is Quentin; that's my brother, Joe, over there with your husband, Howard, who I do business with. Quite a lot of business, in fact."

Toro smiled, wobbled on his feet, and Glass suddenly realized the man was drunk as a skunk.

Livia tried to free herself. Toro put one meaty hand right on her ass and drew her in even closer.

"Hey, your old man's from Havana, just like mine. Livia, loosen up, all right? We might be cousins. We should be nice to each other."

Glass had had enough.

"Mike," he said, putting a hand on Toro's shoulder. "This is Mrs. Saint, and you're Mr. Saint's guest. If you would please —"

But Toro wasn't listening. "It's a party, Quentin—relax. Tell this beautiful woman to have another drink and I'll show her how I cha-cha-cha. *Bésame mucho*, baby. *Bésame mucho*. Or did you forget your Spanish?"

Toro made what Quentin supposed he thought was a dance move, but to Glass it looked like an obscene motion.

Apparently it looked the same to Livia.

She slapped him across the face, hard.

"I know what it means," she said, and stalked out of the club, glaring at her husband as she walked past.

Quentin and Howard exchanged glances.

Saint joined them, Joe Toro a step behind.

"Okay. Sorry about that, Mike. Livia's a little tense, still. The whole thing with Bobby. You understand?"

Mike Toro frowned. "Sure, Howard. I understand." An expression crossed his face then that made Quentin think that maybe the man wasn't as drunk as he looked.

Saint must have caught it as well. "Listen. I'm glad to see both of you—you're welcome here anytime. Drinks on the house, something to eat . . . ?"

Toro looked at Toro, and both shook their heads.

"No. We're goin', I think, Howard," Mike said. "Just came by to congratulate you—on Castle."

"Joe told me. I appreciate it."

Good-byes were said all around.

Saint sighed, watching the Toros go.

"We're gonna have to do some serious fence-mending later, Quentin."

"I know it, Howard."

Glass thought he was talking about the Toros, which was true enough, Mike and Joe would have to be attended to for sure, but there was also Livia to consider. His wife did not like it when he brought home the kind of business the Toros represented.

Saint would mend that particular fence on his own, later tonight. He suspected the little velvet box inside his coat—some very nice Harry Winston earrings he'd had couriered in from New York this morning—would make that process go a lot more smoothly. Besides, after twenty years of marriage, he knew his wife, and Livia was not in a fighting mood

tonight, not really. No, she was in a mood to celebrate, and so, despite the unpleasantness with the Toros, was he.

Especially now that Chadwick had brought Constantine—that was a big thing; he'd see just how big in a few minutes, although the real cause for his good mood was the same as it had been before. The fact that he'd avenged their son; that Bobby, wherever he was, could rest in peace; that Frank Castle—as old man Trafficante used to be so fond of saying—swam with the fishes.

INTERLUDE ONE ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

Jimmy Weeks excused himself from the meeting and went to the men's room, where he promptly threw up. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, thought about the pictures laid out on the conference room table again, and threw up a second time.

Praying to the porcelain god. He hadn't done it in ten years, but he'd been doing it all night, every hour on the hour, ever since he'd heard the news.

Christ, he'd fucked up. He'd fucked up so bad there was no going back from it. He should resign from the bureau right now, go to some rinky-dink Mexican village, and drink himself unconscious. That's just what he was going to do, in fact.

As soon as he stopped crying.

I'm sorry, Frank, he thought, twisting the Rolex around his wrist, the Rolex his friend had given him. So sorry. I swear to God, I didn't know Saint was that crazy, I didn't know he'd kill everybody. I wish I could—

He heard the door to the men's room open and got quickly to his feet.

"Weeks?"

Shit. It was Sandoval. "In here, sir."

"Let's go. The director wants to finish this up now."

"Be right out."

He flushed the toilet, and stepped from the stall.

Sandoval—Franklin H. Sandoval, assistant deputy director in charge of domestic counterintelligence, which made him Weeks's boss—moved to one side, making room for Weeks at the sink.

"Whoever did this, Jimmy—we'll get them. We'll get them, and I swear to God, no one will ever hear from them again. You can pull the trigger yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

Sandoval ripped a paper towel from the dispenser and handed it to him.

"Rough in there, huh?" Sandoval asked.

"I can handle it," Weeks said, though in truth he was getting tired of being grilled about Ares; it wasn't his fault the op had gone bad, that was all on Bobby Saint. But of course now, even more than before, he had to walk a tightwire on that one; he could hardly lead the bureau to the kid's father, because sure as shit Howard Saint would turn right around and point the finger at him.

God.

"Before we go back in," Sandoval said, his voice and manner suddenly hesitant, "there's one more thing."

"Sir?"

His boss sighed. "For obvious reasons, much as I would like to, I can't give the eulogy, Jimmy. On the bureau's behalf."

Weeks's stomach rose up in his throat. He knew what Sandoval was about to say, and he hoped the sudden panic he felt didn't show on his face.

"Sir. I don't know if that's . . . I mean, I don't know if I can . . ."

"You don't have a choice, I'm afraid. The director wants this, Jimmy. I get the sense somebody even higher up might want it, in fact." He put a hand on Weeks's shoulder. "Besides . . . you two were best friends. It's only right you speak. Frank would have wanted it."

"Yes, sir. He would have." Weeks forced himself to nod, though inside, he felt like throwing up all over again.

"Good man. Now let's get back inside, finish this up. Christ, what a mess."

Sandoval strode quickly to the door and through it.

Putting one foot in front of the other, Jimmy Weeks forced himself to follow.

INTERLUDE TWO BOQUERON POINT, PUERTO RICO

"So you're sure you didn't hear anything?" The young naval officer tapped his pencil against his pad, eyeing Candelaria warily.

"No, sir," Manuel Candelaria said. "Didn't see anything, didn't hear anything. Just like I told you. I was here all day."

A fly buzzed around the man's face. He swatted at it futilely and looked back down at his pad.

"We spoke to the Castle housekeeper. Mrs. Gutierrez. She said—"

"Cook."

"Excuse me?"

"Mrs. Gutierrez. She's the cook, not the housekeeper."

"Right. She said she saw your boat out by the old fort that afternoon. Around dusk."

"I go out, do some fishing. Yeah."

"You just said you were here all day."

"Except for the fishing."

The officer sighed.

Candelaria smiled. "You want a drink?"

He held out the bottle he'd been nipping at during the interview. The officer shook his head.

"No, sir. Appreciated, but—can't drink on duty. As I said."

"Right. Okay." Candelaria took a drink himself.

It was iced tea—not the rum he knew the officer thought it was—but he didn't feel the need to correct the man's misconceptions. Lot of people had misconceptions about him, thought he was this crazy old man who did voodoo or some other kind of nonsense, but the truth was, Manuel Candelaria just liked his privacy. Liked to do things by himself. Liked to keep things just the way he wanted them. He'd been married once, must be forty years ago now, back when he lived in San Juan, and that had been a disaster.

Sure it had been nice having a woman around, but the way Olivia kept rearranging all his stuff . . . he couldn't handle it.

So he'd moved as far away from civilization as he could get. Found this little island, built a hut—this was way before all the tourists started coming, he wouldn't be able to do that kind of thing now. Now they had all sorts of records in Boqueron, who owned this little piece of land, who owned that one, but back then, no one cared about that sort of thing—and before he knew it, it was the year 2000 and people thought he was some sort of witch doctor.

"All right, Mr. Candelaria." The officer put his pad back in his pocket, then slapped at another fly. "If you do see or hear anything at all about what happened, you can let the police in town know. They'll get hold of us."

"Okay. The police." Candelaria smiled again. "You bet."

The officer forced himself to return the smile, and left.

Candelaria watched the little launch sputter to life and pull away from his island. Then he went back inside.

He hoped that was the last of them, these people and their questions. They'd been coming here the last two days, every few hours it seemed. First the Puerto Rican Coast Guard; then Sergeant Castillo from the Boqueron police, who he liked; then two men in suits who he didn't like at all, who, in fact, scared him worse than the sharks out past the point; then a reporter, a woman, very beautiful, but very stupid, she started off talking in Spanish to him, very bad Spanish, and never once thought to ask if he spoke English, which he did very well; then someone from the army; then this last one, this young, earnest officer from the U.S. Coast Guard.

He'd given them all the same story. Told them that he'd heard about the killings—how, they'd asked, at which point Candelaria took the little transistor radio out of his trunk and turned it on for them—and that he was horrified. Told them that he knew the Castle family personally—they came here

every few years on these reunions. Very nice people, he said. All of which was the truth.

Then he told them that he'd been home all day, and hadn't seen or heard anything unusual. Which was, as the young officer had just pointed out, a lie.

He had gone out fishing, just as Mrs. Gutierrez had said, had, in fact, been out near the old fort near dusk. . . .

And he had indeed seen something unusual.

Something Manuel Candelaria suspected he would have to keep to himself for a while longer—quite a while longer, in fact, if he was any judge.

The old man surveyed his little one-room hut. He walked to his old trunk then, which stood next to the back wall, and opened it. Put the transistor radio back inside, shut the lid, and then dragged the trunk away from the wall.

Underneath the trunk, there was a trapdoor.

He lifted it and, his old bones already beginning to ache, descended the makeshift wooden ladder to the cave floor. Candelaria had built his hut on top of the little hole in the ground—a three-meter wide, twice again as tall hole in the ground—intending to use it as a shelter during severe storms, but over the years, it had become more of a storage cellar than anything else. A place to put what Olivia had called all of his crap.

He lit a couple candles, and the cave filled with a dull, orange glow.

All his crap had been shoved to one side of the cellar. On the other, lying on top of the only blanket he owned, was a man's body.

The man's face was bruised and battered, more black and blue than anything else. His chest had a hole in it the size of Candelaria's fist, a hole that was still oozing some kind of liquid. Manuel had no idea what it was, but it most surely was not blood. One arm was half severed at the shoulder; one leg was bent in a way that told the old man it was

broken in at least two places, the other had a gunshot wound.

But when he'd found him that night, lying so still in the surf Manuel thought he was dead, the man had told him no hospitals, so no hospitals it was. No hospitals, and no word to anyone at all that he was alive. He made Candelaria promise. Then he'd passed out and hadn't said a word since.

Candelaria approached, holding the candle out in front of him.

The man was awake, he saw. His eyes were open, and staring up at the trapdoor in the ceiling.

"Señor?"

The man didn't move.

"Señor?" Manuel repeated, passing his hand in front of the man's face. He didn't blink.

Candelaria took a closer look and saw that the man was not, in fact, staring at the trapdoor, but straight out into space, at nothing at all.

Madre de Dios, he thought. Mother of God.

While he was upstairs talking to the young officer, the man had passed on.

This was not good. Now what could he do?

Dump the body back in the ocean? That wouldn't be right. Call the authorities? Sergeant Castillo liked him, but if he learned that Candelaria had been lying to him . . .

No more island.

What to do, Manuel thought. What to do.

Which was when the man's hand shot forward and grabbed his wrist.

If Candelaria had been twenty years younger, he would have jumped out of his skin.

"Water," the man said.

Manuel's heart was beating like a drum.

"Si, señor. Water."

He detached the hand from his wrist and, as he turned to go, looked into the man's eyes once again.

They were still staring up into space. Staring at nothing at all.

Frank Castle was alive.

But his eyes were those of a dead man.

PART TWO

PUNISHMENT

EIGHTEEN

The voice in her head came from a long time ago—from a galaxy, as the saying went, far, far away. It was her mother's voice, and the last time she'd heard from her mother had been, what, ten years ago? The night before she'd married husband number one, Mr. Earl Van Dyke, when her mother had called and said she wasn't coming to the wedding, wasn't going to watch her only daughter ruin her life, so she was leaving, good-bye and good luck.

Though it wasn't the harsh, strident voice her mother had used that night she heard in her head right now. No, what she heard was a much softer, gentler voice, the one her mother had used when reading nursery rhymes to her little girl.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells, and cockle shells
And pretty maids all in a row.
She sighed and shook her head.

The rhyme, unfortunately, had nothing to do with reality.

Number one, her name was Joan, not Mary. Number two, her garden (which was not much more than a little patch of bare dirt next to the stoop of 2411 North Cedar) was filled with dog shit, beer cans, and used condoms, not silver bells and cockle shells. It made for a depressing sight; the peonies she'd just planted seemed to sense their lot in life already. They looked wilted and saggy, as if they'd already given up hope.

Joan jabbed her little gardening shovel in the ground next to them and stood up.

"Fuck it," she said out loud. "What's the use?"

A roar sounded as an old Plymouth GTO rounded the corner and pulled into the garage beneath 2411's loft apartment. Her new neighbor. Guy looked to be even worse

than the last one. Never smiled, never said a word, probably thought he was a real badass with that leather coat of his and those sunglasses, though the act didn't scare her a bit. This guy had to be a little slow on the uptake, because who the hell would rent the so-called "loft" above the garage for what Carlos was asking? Loft. Hah. Carlos had tried to get her to rent that place first, before finally agreeing to give her 2B, and as far as she could tell, the only thing that entitled her chiseling, skinflint super to call that apartment a loft was the fact that it didn't have any plumbing outside of a single cold water pipe.

Not that her new neighbor seemed interested in showers. All he seemed to want to do was make noise. Welding and hammering, working on his car and God knows what else till all hours of the night. She would have complained, but like with the peonies . . . what was the use?

It was time to get to work, anyway.

She pushed the front door open. Lock broken again, no key needed. Wonderful. She'd have to get on Carlos's ass about that; maybe he'd have it fixed by Christmas. Doubtful.

Already in a bad mood, she walked down the hall to her apartment, wondering if she should try to repair the lock herself. Maybe Dave would help her. He'd fixed the intercom system last month, fixed it up better than new; everyone's buzzer worked now, and he'd hooked up everyone's TV to the local cable system, even got them all free HBO (which thrilled Joan no end, nothing she liked better than movies).

That was all electronics, though. Wires and stuff. Dave had a way with those kinds of electronic things—computers, TVs. He had like a dozen of them in his apartment. She wasn't sure how he'd do with locks.

She passed Stanley's door then, heard the TV blaring (sounded like one of those soap operas Stanley was always watching, volume turned up to a deafening level to drown out the noise their new neighbor was making), and shook her head. Stanley would certainly be no help fixing the lock;

she liked the man well enough, but he was like a child, just sat in front of the TV all day, every day, stuffing his face full of crap. Doughnuts for breakfast, doughnuts for lunch, French fries for dinner . . . no wonder the guy weighed five hundred pounds.

Inside her apartment, she slipped on her waitress uniform and headed for the door. Stupid-ass-looking outfit. She hated wearing it, the apron most of all, but Mr. Schurr wanted her to look like a “proper waitress,” and she needed the job, so . . .

She had just walked back out into the hall about to lock her door when the loudest noise she’d ever heard in her life, the clang of two huge chunks of metal banging together and smashing into pieces, split the air.

She started, and dropped her key.

The glass in the little window at the end of the hall, the window that looked out into the dimly lit garage, rattled. The plaster in the ceiling above her shook, and a chunk a foot square fell, just missing her head before shattering to pieces on the floor.

A cloud of white dust rose into the air. Joan broke out into a coughing fit.

That does it, she thought, bending to pick up her key. That fucking does it.

Time to give Mr. Badass a little piece of her mind.

As she started down the hall, doors opened behind her. She turned and saw Stanley and Dave stepping out of their apartments.

“Damn,” Dave said. “What the hell is he doing?”

“Very inconsiderate,” Stanley said. “Don’t you think so, Joan?”

“Very. I plan to tell him just that.” She jerked a thumb toward the stairway. “Let’s all tell him.”

The two men turned toward each other and frowned.

“Ah,” Stanley said. “I, uh—”

“Maybe that was it,” Dave suggested. “Maybe he’s finished now, with whatever.”

Joan rolled her eyes. Dave and Stanley, she loved them like brothers, but they were both big wusses.

“You guys,” she sighed. “You’re not going to make me do the dirty work again, are you?”

A sound like an engine revving came from the garage below then. Dave’s eyes widened, and, without saying a word, he strode quickly past her down the hall.

She saw he’d gotten another piercing and shook her head. That had to make like two dozen or so on his face alone, not to mention the navel ring and the thing on the back of his neck, whatever the hell that was. She wondered if he was trying to win a contest or something—most body piercings on the block—when he reached the end of the hall, peered out the little window that overlooked the garage, and let out a long, slow whistle of admiration.

Joan and Stanley joined him.

“Look at that,” he pointed. “You do not see one of those every day.”

Before Joan could see what he was talking about, Stanley squeezed past her, pushing Joan away from the window with his bulk.

“What?” he asked. “What is it?”

“A car, Bumpo. The car. A ram air four, sixty-nine GTO with dual Holly carbs, year-one headers, and a rock crusher tranny four-speed.”

Joan stood up on tiptoes and looked for herself.

She didn’t see what all the fuss was. Their new neighbor was working on a car. A beat-up old car, as far as she could tell, probably got about two miles to the gallon, spewing black smoke every foot of the way. Men and their toys.

Stanley stepped back from the window and shook his head.

“It’s really loud. Does it have to be so loud?”

“It’s beautiful, Bumpo,” Dave replied, rooted in place.

"But when is he going to stop?"

"Maybe never," Joan said. "He hasn't slept all week."

"How do you know?" Bumpo asked.

" 'Cause I haven't slept all week."

"What do you think he does?" Dave asked.

Joan frowned. She had no idea. As far as she could tell he didn't do anything, just welded and hammered and played with big pieces of metal all day and night. He usually went up to his apartment (he had to walk right past her door to get there, being that the loft wasn't directly accessible from the garage, which was how come Joan was so familiar with his schedule) at about three, maybe four in the morning. Reminded her of Earl, in that way.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe he's an artist."

"Wow." Bumpo's eyes were wide. "Our neighbor is an artist."

"Maybe."

"And you're the expert on artists?" Dave asked.

"I've known a few." All of whom had one thing in common with Mr. Badass down there, an ability to work obsessively on things that she couldn't make heads or tails of. Like those bars there in the corner; it looked as if he was making a cage or something. For what?

"So what do you think he's doing?" Stanley asked Dave.

Dave shrugged. "Got me, Bumpo."

"Go ask him," Joan said to Dave. "And tell him to stop making so much damn noise while you're at it."

"Oh, yeah. Right."

Joan shook her head. Pussy. She was about to head off and ask him herself when she saw that Mr. Badass had laid down his tools and was taking measurements of the car's interior. A lot of measurements.

Maybe Dave was right. Maybe he was done making noise—for the moment at least. And speaking of the moment . . .

"I'm late for work, guys. Gotta run."

"Night, Joan," Dave said, eyes still glued to the car.

“Night, Joan.”

As she headed down the hall, she heard Stanley and Dave making plans for later that night. Spaghetti and *American Idol*. It was funny, her two misfit neighbors, always doing things together like an old married couple. Sweet. She liked hanging out with them, too, on her night off.

A thought occurred to her then. Maybe they should invite Mr. Badass up one of those times. That would be the neighborly thing to do—after all, the guy had lived in the building a week already, and not one of them even knew his name to say hello. Yeah. It was a good idea, she decided. Get to know the guy. Find out what he really did for a living. Who knew? Maybe she was right.

Maybe he really was an artist.

NINETEEN

Say what you will about the Jamaican, Micky Duka thought (and people did say plenty about him, not when he was around, of course; nobody had that big a death wish), but the guy had without a doubt the best herb around.

Micky took a last hit off the spliff and passed it back to Loopy.

"That's good stuff, Loop," he said. "God, I needed that."

"Yeah." Loopy smiled back. "I can see. You don't look happy, Mick. That's for sure."

"Who could be happy in a monkey suit like this? Can't even get comfortable." Duka tugged on the valet captain's uniform as if he could stretch it to fit, as if it was part of his skin. Which he sometimes felt it was—these days, it seemed like no sooner had he gotten home from the job than he was back on it, wavin' cars forward, trying to move cars that were double-parked out of the way, trying not to piss off the wrong person at the wrong time . . .

"One thing I don't get, Mick. Why'd you take this job, anyway? I never figured you for somebody who wanted to work a job like this."

Duka shook his head. "Listen, Loop—when Howard Saint suggests you do something, you do it. Am I right?"

"Yeah. I guess." Loopy's face clouded over for a second as he considered the question. Big galoot. Guy was dumber than a pile of rocks, but Micky liked him just the same. Not just because of the joint, but because of what he'd done for his mom after the old man's funeral. Loopy had really stepped up then, helped them through some hard times. For a while there Micky had even stopped calling him Loopy, called him Lou (Lou Palisano, his given name) 'cause he thought the guy was probably tired of being reminded that he was a little slow. But that didn't work out; his friend just

got confused (“Lou? C’mon, Mick, use my name, all right?”), so Loopy it was. Sometimes Loop.

The two of them were sitting on a curb, around the corner from the entrance to Saints and Sinners, sharing the spliff and a few hits off the flask Micky kept in his back pocket. They’d been sitting ever since Micky had gotten off work—almost an hour ago now, he realized.

And he had to be up in the morning tomorrow, on account of Mrs. Saint was having one of her lunches at the club. Which you know who had to valet for.

God, even the Jamaican’s herb couldn’t relax him these days.

Duka stood up.

“I gotta hit the hay, my friend.”

“Come on, Mick. Night’s still young.”

“But I ain’t.” Duka shook his head. “Thanks for bringin’ the spliff, Loop. I’ll see you around.”

“All right.” Loop waved the spliff at him. “See you around.”

Duka saluted his friend with the flask and walked off down the street.

Truth was, he wasn’t that old. It was this job. It really was killin’ him. All he did these days was “yes, sir,” and “no, sir”—there had to be some way he could ask out of it. How to do that without seeming ungrateful, that was the tricky part, because you did not want Howard Saint to think you were ungrateful.

Maybe he could ask for another job in the organization. Something that required a little more brainpower. A job a little farther up the ladder. Though even as he thought about that, Micky realized he wasn’t sure he wanted to go any farther up the ladder, because, after all, his old man had been about as high up that ladder as you could get, and look what happened to him.

He turned the corner toward his car, unbuttoning his jacket the rest of the way as he walked.

At least he could ask Saint's permission to wear something a little more stylish on the job. This uniform . . .

"Why do I have to wear this?" he mumbled to himself, turning the bright red jacket over in his hand. "It's so . . . undignified."

All at once, headlights flared at his back.

Micky turned, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the glare, and saw a car had come down the street behind him. It was stopped now, in the middle of the road, blocking him in. A big old, rusted hunk of junk. He didn't know anybody with a car like that.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Who's that? Loopy?"

The driver's side door opened. Footsteps sounded. A big man's heavy, slow footsteps. Loopy, then, playing some kind of trick on him.

Except, he remembered, Loopy didn't drive.

"Hey!" Micky yelled again. "Whoever that is, shut those lights, huh?"

There was no reply.

He was getting a little nervous. Not too nervous, because he worked for Howard Saint now, and there was one good thing about working for Howard Saint: Nobody fucked with you. Nobody who wanted to live, at least.

He squinted into the light and saw a man walking toward him, silhouetted in the light. A big man, just like he'd guessed. He couldn't see his face.

"I don't know who you're lookin' for," Micky squeaked. "But I work for Howard Saint."

The footsteps stopped.

"I know."

Micky almost wet his pants. The man's voice, whoever he was, was all raspy and thick, as if he had something coating his throat. As if he was using his voice for the first time in a long, long while.

"Well . . ." Micky squeaked again. "Then what's the matter with you? Buzz off, unless you got a death wish."

In response, the figure started forward again.

"Hey," Micky began. "Didn't you hear me? I said . . ."

His voice trailed off, then, as the man stepped in front of the headlights, and Micky, at last, saw his face.

"Oh, shit."

"Death wish." Frank Castle smiled. "That's it, Micky. That's it exactly."

TWENTY

It was a bad thing he was doing, so, as he worked, he kept glancing over at the picture. He drew strength from it; it reminded him of the purpose, the rationale, behind his actions.

It was a picture of a woman and a boy, smiling faces, faces full of love. He remembered taking that picture. He had been smiling, too, then. He used to smile everytime he looked at it. Not now.

Nothing made him smile now. Certainly not the picture. Now when he looked at it, he heard screams. He saw blood, and bullets, and bodies, and death. His mother's, his father's, his wife's, and his son's . . .

Which was not a bad thing. It kept him focused.

He knew he had to use his time wisely, because he didn't know how much more he had left. Every minute he had now was extra, a bonus beyond the hours allotted to him to walk this earth.

Because he had been dead, too; Frank Castle was sure of it. That moment in the water, when the darkness had clouded his vision . . .

Well. He had prayed for a miracle then. A second chance. And that miracle had come. Two miracles, in fact—the first in the form of that metal cylinder, which turned out to be Will's scuba tank, the tank they'd left behind for his son's dive around the point the next day, the dive that had never happened, that never would happen now.

But that tank had saved his life. He'd sucked life-sustaining oxygen from it until he judged John Saint and his thugs were gone, that it was safe to swim for the beach.

The second miracle had been Manuel Candelaria. The old man had found him on the shore that night, half dead, and had brought him back to his island, hidden him from the

authorities, nursed him back to health. Without Candelaria, Castle would have died a second, definitely final, time.

That day when, at last, he'd been well enough to leave the old man's hut and return to the compound where his world had ended, he'd almost wished he had.

Those first few minutes, stumbling through the bungalows, breaking through the police tape, wandering like a drunken man in search of a bottle of wine, had been like a waking nightmare.

Months had passed since the massacre. The bodies were all gone. The walls and floors were spotless. There was a FOR SALE sign on the yard outside, and a FOR AUCTION tag on almost every item inside—the artwork, the chairs, the carpets, even the toys his dad had bought for the littlest kids to play with. To anyone who happened by in search of a bargain, he had no doubt it looked like just another estate sale.

Not to Castle.

He looked at the manicured lawn, the repaired patio flagstones, the immaculately kept house, and he saw blood. He saw bodies. He saw his family die all over again.

"Hey!"

He swiveled in his chair.

On the other side of the room, lit by a single spot, Micky Duka hung upside down, stripped to the waist, hands tied behind his back.

"I swear to God," Duka said, tears running down—or actually, up—his face. "I didn't—"

"Shut up," Castle growled. "I'm not ready for you yet."

"Oh, God. Otto—"

"I said shut up."

Duka shut up. Stopped talking at least, though his pathetic sniffing continued.

There. Castle finished attaching the smaller head to the blowtorch. He'd been working with metal all afternoon,

getting the place and the car ready, but he didn't need all that heat for what he planned next.

He looked over to the photo again, to strengthen his resolve. Maria. Will. Their smiling faces. The touch of his son's hand, the smoothness of his wife's cheek.

The cold, dead surface of their gravestones.

The cemetery in Arlington had been his second stop on returning to the mainland. The first, first only because it was on the way down from Baltimore, where he'd flown into from Port-au-Prince, had been a self-storage facility way off the beaten track, halfway to D.C. There, Castle had picked up the footlocker that now stood in the corner of the garage. It had been full of goodies from his Delta Force days. It was a little less full now (he'd unpacked some of those goodies and installed them around his new home over the last week), and Castle was counting on emptying it before too much more time had passed. How soon? Well, that depended somewhat on what he learned—or didn't learn—from Micky Duka.

Which brought him right back around to the bad thing he was about to do.

"Okay Micky," he said, rolling his chair across the room toward his helpless captive. "Let's talk."

I will not scream, Micky Duka told himself.

I will not beg, nor will I cry. I will reason with Castle, I will talk to him mano a mano, I will tell him what I know, which is not much, and I will subtly work in references to our previous association, the hash in Amsterdam, the young ladies in St. Pete (though he frowned at that, not being able to remember just that second if Otto—no Castle—had stuck around to enjoy those young ladies or not), the Fourth of July picnic on that yacht Loopy rented—and he will acknowledge my honest efforts to help him, and he will cut me down, and we will say good-bye.

Except the second Castle spoke, the second Micky heard that I-don't-give-a-fuck tone in the man's voice, he got a

bad feeling in his stomach. An I-think-I'm-gonna-be-sick, oh-God-I-don't-want-to-die kind of feeling.

"Stay away from me, Otto—Castle—whoever you are! I've got friends, you know!"

"Oh, I know." Castle's chair rolled even closer, then stopped. Metal hinges creaked, and Micky saw Castle was reaching inside something—a cabinet of some kind. For a brief second, light from within illuminated his face. Duka caught a glimpse of a long, nasty scar along one side of the man's face before the cabinet shut and the darkness swallowed Castle again.

"That's why you're here. Let's talk about your friends, Micky."

"Make your own friends, buddy! You're nuts, okay? Kidnapping me like this—I mean, that's against the law, you know. Aren't you the law?"

Castle ignored his question.

"Sorry you feel that way about me, Mick," Castle said in that same creepy monotone. "But let's talk about it, why don't we?"

Castle's chair rolled into the circle of light surrounding Micky then, and Duka saw the scar again.

It was really more of a burn, running all down one side of his face. The skin looked red, raw, and painful—he couldn't imagine how it had looked, or felt, back when he'd first gotten it.

Then there was the hair—Frank Castle black, not the Otto Krieg brown. It was thinner, too, just like the man himself. Castle had lost a lot of weight—too much, Micky thought. He didn't look healthy. Just skin and bones. And the look in his eyes . . .

"Come on, man. Just leave me alone, okay?"

His voice, Duka was ashamed to realize, was shaking.

Castle rose slowly from his chair, ignoring Micky again, and moved closer. He was holding something in his hands;

Duka tried to twist his body so he could see what it was, but failed.

“Question.” Castle leaned into his face. “Who gave me up?”

“I don’t know, I swear.”

Castle grabbed him by the hair and yanked.

“Ow!”

“You don’t help me,” Castle said. “And I’ll kill you now.”

The man yanked even harder—tears came to Micky’s eyes as Castle pulled his head up higher, till the two of them were literally face-to-face.

“Who gave me up?”

“I swear,” Micky said. “On the Bible, on my father’s grave, I don’t know. The Saints tell me nothing.”

“Nothing.” Castle shook his head. “They pay your rent, your legal bills . . . you should know something.”

He let Micky go then. Duka swung like a pendulum for a second, then came to rest.

Then he saw what Castle had been holding in his hand.

An acetylene torch.

“Frank,” he said. “Otto. Remember when we were out on the boat? Didn’t we have a good time then? Buddy? So why the torch? What’s the torch for, hey?”

“What’s the torch for?” Castle turned a valve—with a little pop, the flame lit. “I said I was going to kill you—remember? Though that doesn’t mean you’re going to die right away.”

Duka let out a little squeak. “You’re not serious.”

Castle held the torch out in front of him and adjusted the flame.

“Two thousand degrees. Hot enough to turn steel into butter. It won’t hurt at first, Mick. It’s too hot.”

Micky’s eyes darted this way and that. He had to get the fuck out of here, get away from this lunatic before—

“See, the flame sears the nerve endings shut. It kills them. You go into shock, and all you feel is . . . cold. Not

what you would expect, right? Isn't science fun, Micky?" He shook his head and shrugged, as if he had a hard time believing it himself, the hot/cold thing. "Isn't science fun?"

"Yeah. Okay. Science is fun. You know what else is fun, Otto? Good friends, you know, good times—remember when I gave you the last hit off Reggie's spliff, in Amsterdam? And I bought you—"

"You'll smell burning meat, Micky and then . . . then, it'll hurt."

"I swear," Duka said. "I'm telling the truth. I don't know anything. Please, for God's sake—"

"Ah." Castle held up a hand and shook his head.

God.

He didn't want to hear about God. Candelaria had talked about God, too, when Castle was leaving for the mainland. What was it he'd said then?

Right. *Vaya con Dios*. Go with God.

Castle told Duka now what he'd told Candelaria then.

"Sorry, Mick," he said. "God is gonna sit this one out."

He brought the thing in his hand forward then, and touched it—ever so lightly—to Duka's back.

Micky screamed like a woman giving birth.

TWENTY-ONE

Dave and Bumpo came out into the hall at the exact same second.

"Did you hear that?" Bumpo asked.

"How could you not hear it?" Dave—Spacker Dave to his friends, of which he had about six, about because he wasn't sure exactly where Bumpo or Joan fell on the friend spectrum, so he was counting each of them as a half friend for the moment—looked at his neighbor and frowned.

"You think he's okay?"

Bumpo frowned back. "I don't think that was him."

Dave nodded grimly. Actually, he didn't think it was him—him being their new neighbor, Mr. Badass, as Joan liked to call him—either.

Another scream sounded. Even louder than the first, if that was possible.

The two men looked at each other again and turned as one toward the little window at the end of the hallway.

"Go see," Bumpo said.

"You go see."

"I don't want to."

Dave nodded. Neither did he.

Bumpo's face suddenly brightened.

"Could it be a game?"

"A game?"

"You know—like a war game or something. I saw one of those on TV, this reality show? They had a guy on it who looked a little like him. Mean. Dangerous. He had—"

"Bumpo." Dave shook his head. Sometimes he wondered if the reason why his neighbor had never been able to hold down a job was because he was a little . . . o-slay. "Why would someone scream like that if it was a game?"

"Ah." The man nodded. "I see your point."

Whoever was screaming screamed again.

“Definitely not a game,” Bumpo said. “Should we call the police?”

Dave thought a moment. Thought, specifically, about how big Mr. Badass was, and how little, by comparison, he and Bumpo were.

“Let’s stay out of it. He’s a very scary man.”

“But maybe he’s killing someone! Maybe we’re next!”

Dave nodded. “Exactly. So we should mind our own business. Pretend like we didn’t hear a thing.”

Bumpo nodded.

Once more, the two men turned as one, walked back into their respective apartments, and locked their doors.

Now they were getting somewhere.

“I’ll tell you anything!” Duka screamed. “Anything you want to know.”

“I bet you say that to all the guys, Mick.”

Duka was gasping for breath.

Pathetic, Castle thought.

“Look, Otto—Frank, I mean—I’m not a strong person, but I’m not a stupid person. I don’t know who ratted you out, if I did I swear I’d—”

Castle jabbed him again.

“DAMN!” Duka shouted. “That hurts, oh Christ, it hurts. You’re a sick man, Castle, I was gonna say I don’t know who ratted you out, but I do know some other things.”

“Okay. Tell me.”

“I know how the Saints and the Toros are connected. Bobby told me.”

“The Toros?” For a second, Castle was confused. Who were the Toros?

Then he remembered. It had been in the file on Saint—one of the things Brent was investigating about the man, a reputed connection to Mike and Joe Toro, who ran an illegal gambling operation down in Ybor City.

“Okay,” Castle said. “Keep going.”

“Saint’s a currency broker, converts pesos to dollars. He —”

Castle jabbed him again.

“ARGGH!” Mickey screamed. “What was that for? I was telling you—”

“You were telling me Howard Saint is a currency broker.

That’s in the papers.” He waved the torch slowly back and forth in front of Duka’s face. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Wait, wait. Please.” Duka took a breath. “The thing is, the currency business—that’s a business you can run clean or dirty. Saint, he runs it in a river of blood.”

Castle nodded. River of blood. Interesting phrase.

“Go on.”

“See, the Toros, they make money from gambling and drugs. Cash businesses. The problem? You can’t bank it anywhere because the Feds will investigate. So what do you do?”

“They give it to Saint. Is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s right. They give it to Saint. What’s he do? Cigarette boats. Sends ’em to the Cayman Islands, and, phhht, the money’s gone, wired to banks all over the world. They turn around and wire it back to Saint, right here in Tampa. Then he loans the money to the Toros, who never pay it back. Minus his forty percent, of course.”

Castle’s eyes widened. “Saint takes forty percent?”

“Yeah. Saint takes forty percent. Pretty slick, hey?”

Castle nodded again. Pretty goddamn slick indeed, especially that 40 percent cut, the most he’d ever run across in these kinds of money-laundering schemes before—and he’d worked a half dozen of them, knew all the ins and outs, the weak points where you could get at the dirty money before it disappeared—was thirty percent, and the guy taking that had to discount his services in an awful big hurry when his customers found out how much he was overcharging them.

A thought occurred to Castle then.

"Where do they drop the cash?"

Duka frowned.

"What?"

"The cash from the clubs, Micky. That the Toros give to Saint? Where do they drop it?"

"Oh." Duka nodded. "Downtown. In Saint's building. That part of the setup, I know."

Duka went on to explain. Castle listened, nodding as the man talked. This was information he could use—not exactly what he'd intended to get out of Duka, but a good starting point for him.

As for Micky . . .

Castle looked at the picture—

Maria. Will.

—and stood.

"Okay, Mick," he said. "We're done here."

"Done?" Duka smiled hopefully. "So you'll cut me down from here now, right? Let me go?"

"In a second, Mick. I sure will."

And then he took the thing in his hand and jabbed Duka one last time.

This scream was louder than all the rest.

He would die like a man.

Damned if Castle would see him cry. He could burn him to a crisp, sizzle his skin right off, but Micky Duka would sit here—hang here, really—and take it without flinching. Okay, maybe one or two screams, but that was it. Micky Duka would—

Castle stepped in front of him and crammed the torch into his mouth.

For a second, it burned, the same ice-cold burn that he'd been feeling on his back since Castle had started torturing him. Bastard. Killing wasn't enough, the psycho had to burn his face so that—

Micky suddenly realized the thing in the mouth had stopped burning and had started tasting like . . . oranges?

He frowned, looked up, and saw that there was no torch in his mouth, that, in fact, he was sucking on a Popsicle.

A second later, Castle had cut him down, and Duka was on his feet, feeling his back where Castle had burned him with the torch, only there were no burns there either.

He turned around again and saw Castle pass the torch, which was still in his hand, back and forth over a piece of steak on a tin plate. It sizzled and popped beneath the flame.

The steak and the Popsicle. The sizzle and the burn.

Duka shook his head.

"You are not a nice person."

"That's right. Be sure and remember that, Micky."

"Oh, I will. Without a doubt." Duka rubbed his wrists, trying to get some feeling back into them. "So what's up? You gonna string up Howard Saint and blowtorch him?"

Castle shut off the torch and set it down on the floor. "I like that idea. But I have something better. And guess what?" He looked at Micky with those same creepy deadman's eyes. "You're going to help me."

"Oh, no." Duka held up his hands and backed away.

"Listen, Otto—sorry, Frank—I told you things. Saint finds out I said them, *my* whole family's dead. You know what I'm saying?"

"I know." The man kept his eyes fixed on Duka. "But you don't want to stay Howard Saint's lackey your whole life, do you, Micky? End up like your father?"

Blowtorch or not, FBI guy or not, Micky was about to give Frank Castle what-for for dragging his dad into this when he looked right into the man's eyes, and he got the strangest sensation. Like Castle was seeing right through him, right to the core of him.

Right to the truth.

"I hate the Saints," he said then, in a cold, hard voice he barely recognized as his own. "All of 'em. For what they did to my old man."

"Good." Castle turned and walked to the far wall. He flicked a switch, and the room suddenly filled with light.

It was like a goddamn junkyard in here, Duka thought. There was scrap metal everywhere, all kinds of tools, that rusted old car back in the corner, and an old army footlocker. Castle now crossed over to the locker and opened it. He started pulling weapons out of the crate, more kinds even than Yuri Astrov had. More sophisticated ones, too, it looked like, some of them just tubes with little computer screens attached to them, real high-tech-looking things that Duka would bet you could fire off twenty miles away from your target and hit square on.

He was wondering if there was any way in the world he could get a few of those out of here and down to Ybor City to sell to Ordito, who was still plenty pissed that the original deal had fallen through, when all at once Castle spun and pointed something straight at him.

Micky almost pissed his pants until he realized it was a camera.

"Tell me about them," Castle said then. "The Saints. What they do. For fun and leisure. When. Where."

"Fun. Well . . ." He thought a moment. "Livia—Mrs. Saint—all she does is shop, far as I could tell. That, and go to the gym. Then there's John, who definitely likes to have fun. Usually, there's a blonde involved in that equation, although lately—"

"Micky." Castle did not look happy, so Duka shut up immediately.

"Yeah?"

"Saint first."

"Yeah, sure. Howard's a man of strict habits."

"Example." Castle set down the camera and picked up something else off a long table by the window. A little book

of some kind.

“Well, he has first tee time—never fails—every Wednesday at the Tampa Country Club.”

“Go on.”

Micky did, talking about Howard Saint’s schedule and his strict habits for several minutes, Castle peppering him with questions throughout. Then they moved on to Livia, and then to John, and then to Quentin Glass, with whom Micky had to admit he wasn’t too familiar, as he made a point of staying well out of that psycho’s way.

The whole time they talked, Castle took notes in his little book.

The intensity on his face as he wrote was frightening to behold.

23 September 0340 Hours

Dog bark woke me. Pit bull next door-Colossus. Belongs to drug dealer known locally as the Jamaican, real name Peter Nichols. Violent, worthless animal-the man, not the dog. Will terminate soonest possible opportunity.

Checking notes, slept for one hour twenty minutes. Optimal. Refreshed, refocused. Will now review Duka's information and plan surveillance routine. Several opportunities immediately suggest themselves; reconnaissance will narrow options until a course of action emerges.

Decision to salvage journal from compound was, in retrospect, a correct one, provides as before a place to organize thoughts. Looking over previous entries, realize nature of this book has changed however-no longer a document of my life, a recording of my thought processes, a place to reflect on events.

Now more of a repository for necessary information, a sketchpad on which attack scenarios may be envisioned, fleshed out, and finalized.

A war journal, in short.

TWENTY-THREE

Why, oh why, did she have such horrendous taste in men?

Starting right with her first boyfriend in junior high, George Spain, who set fire to her locker when she broke up with him, continuing with Pete “Pistol Pete” Madigan in her first and only year of junior college, who broke her arm during what he termed “horseplay,” and right on up to husband number one, Earl Van Dyke, who’d done the worst thing of all, the thing she couldn’t even bear to think about.

. . .

The point was, Joan had a knack for finding losers and making them her own. She couldn’t seem to learn her lesson—after leaving Earl, she took up with another piano player, Joe Hunter, who went out on the road two days after they got married and never came back; and then there were various other sleazebags here and there, as she worked her way up from Fort Lauderdale to Daytona and on up to Tampa, which brought her right around to the sleazebag at hand. . . .

Mike Tremont, whom Joan had been stupid enough to sleep with a half-dozen times when she first came to the city, before realizing what a dirt ball he was. She’d broken it off clean, she thought, thought he was out of her life forever, heard that he’d moved down to Orlando and gotten a job with Disney, but last Tuesday morning, during the breakfast rush, she’d come down the counter taking orders and whose skeevy little face did she find leering up at her but Mike Tremont’s. She’d pretended to be happy to see him, but when it became clear that he thought he could pick right up where they’d left off, that he for some reason thought she owed him something (sex, for one, money probably, for another), things had turned ugly.

A little scary, even. Mike had pulled a knife.

Luckily, one of the other customers on the counter had been Ben Kubiak, Officer Ben Kubiak, who, even though he was off duty and not packing, had easily disarmed Mike and gotten him hauled away in a black-and-white.

But last night—early this morning, actually, four A.M. or so, no one in the place but her and Willie, the cook—Mike Tremont had wandered right back into the diner.

She threw down her order pad, put her hands on her hips, and got down to it, right away, because that was who she was.

“Don’t make me call the cops, Mike.”

Tremont sat down at the counter and smiled.

“Coffee,” he said.

She glared at him.

He took out a dollar bill and put it on the counter.

“Please.”

She poured a cup and slid it over to him.

He sipped at it for the next half hour, staring at her the whole time. Creep. He kept staring as the diner started filling up with early-morning customers.

Finally, ten minutes before six, just as her shift was about to end, he stood up and pushed his cup toward her.

“Thanks, Joan.”

She didn’t say anything, just reached out to clear the cup away—

And he grabbed her hand.

“You’re lookin’ good. Very, very good.”

Before she could swing at him, he let go.

He put another dollar down on the counter—“Tip.”

—and walked out the door.

Even then, though, he didn’t leave. He stared at her through the front window for the next ten minutes, till Mr. Schurr showed up with Gina. Then when she turned to the window to point him out, he was gone.

Still, Joan had played it safe. She got Willie to drive her home. To wait while she entered the building and shut the

door—slammed it so the lock would catch, even though she knew she'd have to fiddle with it to get back out later that afternoon—and made her way down the hall to her apartment, thinking about Mike every step of the way. Bastard. Come back here, try to fuck up my life? She had mace in her apron. She always carried it; she'd even used it a couple times, and she wouldn't mind spraying it a third. She pictured Mike screaming and clawing at his eyes, and—

A hand touched her shoulder.

She didn't panic, she didn't scream, she just turned, reaching for the mace, wondering how in the hell the bastard had snuck up so close without her hearing a thing.

But it was Stanley.

Dressed in his big puffy slippers, sweatpants, and an I LOVE LUCY T-shirt.

"Hi, Joan."

"Hi, Stanley." She sighed. "Jesus, you scared me."

"I'm sorry." He smiled. "How was work?"

"Work was fine." She didn't have the strength to get into it with Bumpo right now; all she wanted to do was sleep.

He was still smiling.

"What?"

"We had some excitement here last night," Stanley said, leaning forward and whispering conspiratorially. "The new neighbor."

"What do you mean?"

"I was watching TV—"

No shit, Joan thought.

"—when there was screaming. Really loud screaming."

"Mr. Badass was screaming?"

"No, not him," Bumpo said. "Another man."

Joan's stomach turned.

Christ, she thought. Carlos has rented out the loft to a serial killer.

"Why was the other man screaming, Stanley?"

"I don't know. We didn't go see."

"We?"

"Me and Dave."

"Dave heard it, too."

"Oh, you couldn't miss it. It was really loud."

"Stanley, did you call the police?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The man reddened. "Well . . . No, I mean. We didn't want to—"

"Oh, Christ." Joan turned back to her door and opened it. "I'll call. When was this?"

"Last night, you know. Late. Very late. But, Joan—it's okay. We don't need to call."

"We don't need to call." She shook her head in disbelief. "Stanley, for all you know this other guy is dead."

"No, he's not. He's fine."

"But—"

"I saw him walk out, an hour or so after the screaming. Walked right out the front door, in a little red uniform. Whistling, big smile on his face . . ."

Joan made a noise of disgust. Mr. Badass, in those sunglasses and leather coat; another man in a little red uniform screaming . . . Most definitely, she did not want to know what had been happening in that apartment last night.

One thing was certain, though; her idea about inviting the new neighbor to dinner . . .

That was out the window for sure.

TWENTY-FOUR

There. Finally.

Frank Castle watched the first truck drive past, then glanced at his watch.

Seven twenty-five A.M. Ten minutes behind schedule. It was the rain. It was only a drizzle, but the driver was undoubtedly under orders to take no chances. So the second truck would be late as well. The only question was how late. Much past eight o'clock, and Castle would have to abort: the traffic would be too heavy.

And if he aborted this morning, he would have to put everything else on hold as well for at least another week. Which would mean another week that Howard Saint and his family got to live their debauched, corrupt lives in front of his face while his wife and son rotted in the ground.

Unacceptable.

He had to take some kind of action. John Saint. Castle saw no conceivable way to use him in the plan. He served no purpose at all. Spent his days lying around the family pool and his nights throwing his father's money around and fucking anything that moved. Killing him would be a pleasure. Kidnap him, take him back to the loft, *really* do to him what he'd only pretended to do to Duka . . .

Except he couldn't. Just getting at John Saint would require going through several bodyguards. He did that, and Howard Saint's antenna would go up and the whole plan would be threatened. No. If he aborted today, he would just have to wait. Patience. Patience was the key.

Frank Castle leaned back in the seat of the GTO. He was parked in the Channelside parking lot off Cumberland, looking north to downtown. From the lot, Castle had a perfect view of both the Saint Tower, some half-dozen blocks in the distance, and Meridian Street, on which the first truck had just driven past.

Seven twenty-six now. Even if the second truck, by some miracle, was on schedule, he had nineteen minutes to wait.

He would allot ten to review his plan.

There was a manila envelope on the seat next to him. Castle opened it and slid out a photo. Howard Saint, hitting from the tee at the eleventh hole of the Tampa Country Club. Time of picture: eight-fifty A.M., last Wednesday. The eleventh was a long hole, a par-five dogleg: the green was hidden from the tee. The green, in fact, was hidden from virtually everywhere and—conveniently enough—backed up onto the abandoned Parsons Chemical factory and the fence that separated the two. That had made the eleventh perfect for Castle's purposes. Its isolated location would also allow him to abort the second phase of this morning's operation should that become necessary.

He slid the photo of Saint back in the envelope and took out another.

This picture was of Livia Saint, coming from a spa, on her way to a movie. Taken at seven fifty-seven P.M., last Thursday. The photo was unrelated to today's events, but Castle had selected it to review for its place in his larger scheme. Livia's regular Thursday evening routine was the only part of her schedule that was predictable. He intended to use that predictability against her; two nights ago, it had suddenly occurred to him how.

Quentin Glass. Who'd provided Castle with his only surprise during the entire week of surveillance.

Castle reached into the envelope again, intending to pull out the photo of Glass that had helped crystallize his plan, but instead he came up with a shot of John Saint, parked in front of the Tampa 2001 Odyssey Strip Club, one-eighteen A.M., Sunday night, kissing two strippers good-bye, two more in the car waiting for him.

Castle dropped that picture to the floor and found the one he was looking for.

Quentin Glass, Howard Saint's right-hand man, using his own right hand on a young boy in a way that—if Castle wasn't mistaken—was now illegal in the state of Florida. Time of picture: three-fifteen P.M., Saturday afternoon.

He sat and thought then, reviewing details in his mind, refining lines, movements, motivations. It was a complex plan—because it depended so much on the actions and reactions of others, he couldn't be exactly sure how it would all fall out. But of one thing, he was fairly certain.

At the end of the day, he would have his vengeance.

Seven thirty-nine. He put the pictures away.

Seven forty-seven. The second truck appeared on Meridian. Only two minutes late—this driver, obviously, was not as concerned about the rain. Castle was pleased.

He dropped the GTO in gear and followed.

"Hurry it up, sweetheart."

Dante put a five down on the counter. The woman at the grill turned and glared at him.

"Money don't make 'em cook any faster," she said.

He rolled his eyes. What the fuck—try to provide a little motivation, and people give you attitude. It was just like Mr. Saint was always tellin' him—the world was divided up into winners and whiners, and this fat broad cookin' his egg sandwich was definitely a whiner.

He shook his head.

"Never mind."

Dante picked up the five and headed for the door.

"Hey—what about the sandwich?"

"You eat it."

"Hey! Goddamn it. You ordered it, you're gonna pay for it!"

He kept walking. Yeah, he'd ordered it, but he'd said he was in a hurry, and five minutes to cook a fuckin' egg, forget it.

"Asshole!"

Whoa.

He stopped walking and turned.

"What did you say?"

The woman put her hands on her hips. "I said—you were an asshole who—"

The dishwasher ran out from the kitchen, and stepped between the two of them. Young kid. Looked familiar. "Sorry, Mr. Dante, my aunt she gets a little tense this time of the morning. You gotta forgive her. She don't necessarily know what she's saying."

The woman tried to push around the kid. "I know what I'm sayin'—hey, Nicky, what are you doin'?"

What the kid was doin' was a smart thing, tryin' to keep this woman from shootin' her mouth off again because Dante was about to bitch slap her into next week. Mouthin' off to him. Another thing Mr. Saint told him: If you want respect from people you gotta let 'em know you deserve it.

But now he knew who the kid was at least—Nicky Cressoti. Margie's boy. Friend of Bobby's, he'd seen him at the funeral.

"Hey, Nick," he said. "How you been?"

"Okay. Workin'. Good to see you, Mr. Dante."

"Yeah. You, too." He gestured toward the fat broad. "Tell your aunt there, short order cook means things gotta come in short order, like quick, all right?"

"Yeah. Sure. Sorry, Mr. Dante."

The woman peeked around Nicky. "Me, too. Sorry."

She didn't look sorry, she still looked pissed, but she also looked as if she'd finally clued in to who he was.

Dante nodded. "Sure. No problem."

"You want some doughnuts instead, Mr. Dante?" Nick asked. He nodded to the display case by the register. "Come in fresh from Sunrise about an hour ago—some nice chocolate ones."

Dante frowned. He was tryin' to do that Atkins diet; that's why he'd ordered the egg sandwich instead of stopping at Waffle House for his usual, but Sunrise doughnuts . . .

What the heck. A little break from the diet wouldn't kill him.

"Yeah, sure. Gimme a couple. Chocolate frosted."

Nick smiled. "Comin' right up."

"No." The aunt moved past Nick, smiling herself now. "I get them."

And she did—not just two, but a half dozen, taking them carefully out of the case and putting them in a pastry box for him. Dante watched her back as she carefully packed them and tied up the box with a piece of string. That was nice. Goin' out of her way to make up for the bad impression she made.

"On the house," she said, handing him the box.

"For you," Dante said, holding out the five.

She shook her head. "No, I insist."

Dante shrugged. What the heck.

"Okay. Thanks. Catch you next time, Nick."

"So long, Mr. Dante."

"Pleasure serving you," the woman said.

Nice people, Dante thought on his way out the door. Put a smile on his face, turned his day around a little after the lousy start he'd had. The freakin' dog that kept barkin' last night, every hour on the hour, had kept him up till it was almost dawn, and then the power in his house goin' off so that he overslept for the first time in all the years he'd been on the job for Mr. Saint. Which meant that he was late pickin' up Spoon, which meant that they were gonna be late gettin' to the tower, which meant Toros' men would be pissed, but who cared about Toros' men being pissed?

Not him. Besides, what did they really need him and Spoon there for?

Who in their right mind would fuck with Howard Saint's money?

TWENTY-FIVE

Eight oh-two.

Corner of Jackson and Willette.

Raining harder now. Most people weren't prepared: wet newspapers and suit coats pulled up over their heads. Weathermen being cursed; forgotten umbrellas being cursed. Castle didn't have an umbrella, either, but he didn't care.

All he needed, he had underneath his jacket.

The WALK sign flashed.

People crossed quickly, heading for the entrance to Saint Tower. Castle watched them hurry off to their jobs, thinking that, in about half an hour, they would all be wishing they'd stayed outside in the rain.

The second truck drove by, blinker flashing. Castle watched as it turned left, across traffic, down a little alley that ran parallel to the tower.

He checked his watch—eight oh-three—and followed.

He walked briskly, Halliburton case in hand, swinging at his side. A man with a purpose, a man on his way somewhere, taking a shortcut down the alley to the next street over, perhaps.

Ahead of him, a rumble sounded. The steel gates of the Saint Tower loading bay, lifting open. The truck's left blinker flashed again, and it turned into the bay.

Castle walked past, eyes straight ahead, as the gates began to come down again.

At the last possible second, just as they were about to slam shut, he ducked left and rolled underneath them, kept rolling until he was underneath the truck itself, hidden from sight.

He pressed a button on the Rolex, and the dial lit up.

Eight oh-four.

He was in the building.

The truck doors opened. Footsteps sounded on either side of him.

“—sucks, man. We supposed to get help on this end, too, you know?”

“Tell me about it. I been on since two A.M., man. Had this college boy kept hangin’ round the two-dollar table, tryin’ to count cards. Wouldn’t take a polite hint, so I finally had to toss him.”

“So?”

Castle heard the rear doors of the truck opening. He rolled to his left, out from under the truck, and stood, his back against the driver’s-side door.

“So he shows up an hour later with these two jocks and tries to get back in. Ow!”

“What?”

“Lift, man. These things are heavy.”

Something slammed to the floor. Castle heard the sound of metal on concrete, then the squeak of wheels. He drew the shotgun out from under his jacket.

The front of what looked like a laundry hamper appeared around the corner of the truck, followed a second later by a short, stocky man in a muscle shirt.

“So these jocks,” the man was saying, his attention focused on who he was talking to, not on the hamper or on what was in front of him, “are just beggin’ for me to hit them, which I—”

He finally looked up, just as Castle stepped forward and whipped him across the face with the barrel of the shotgun.

He went down without a sound.

“Eddie? Somethin’ wrong?”

The other man came around the back of the truck, saw Castle, and had just enough time to curse before Castle hit him, too, and he fell next to his friend.

The first man had a plastic security badge clipped to a chain around his neck. Castle ripped it loose and stood.

The hamper in front of him was a cash bin, full of money from the Toro brothers' casino. Blood money, about to be laundered clean by Howard Saint.

A shame, but the contents of this particular bin would probably end up on Saint's cigarette boats later today. Envisioning this morning's operation, Castle had originally thought to deactivate the bay's sprinkler system and burn the money, but he found he didn't have the necessary computer skills. A weakness, a chink in his armor: he would have to address it at some point. For now, he'd have to leave this cash behind—an unfortunate, but necessary, compromise.

Besides . . . the real prize awaited him upstairs.

He dragged the men under the truck, and put the hamper back in it.

Then he headed for the elevator.

"Well send someone out to find him." Howard Saint strode down the fairway of the seventh hole, cell phone in hand, with Lincoln hurrying behind him, holding an umbrella over his boss's head to keep the man dry. "Send two people then. I want him here in a half hour, or it's your ass. Understand?"

Saint ended the call without another word and handed the phone back to Lincoln. His son John—goddamn, he loved that boy, but sometimes . . .

Here Rebecca had gone to all this trouble to set up a photo op for him—some shots of father and son playing golf together to go with a piece on Saints and Sinners; the photographer was scheduled to meet them on the last hole—and where was John? No one knew. Not Livia, not Alonzo, and most definitely not that monkey he'd just got off the phone with, Carl Worowski, whom he'd hired to be his son's personal bodyguard. Goddamn. Was he going to have to kill another of his employees? That would be hell on morale.

"No sign of him, sir?"

Saint turned and saw Cutter, who was carrying his golf bag, looking up anxiously. He should have put Cutter with

John—those two got along.

“No. Not yet.”

“If I might be permitted to say—he’ll show up, Mr. S. I know he will. John’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, I know.” Saint exhaled, shook his head again. “Kids, Cutter. Sometimes . . .”

“I know what you mean, sir. My sister’s little one—my nephew.” He smiled. “A blessing and a curse, she says.”

Saint nodded and stopped walking.

There was his ball, smack in the middle of the rough. Christ, what was with him today? He was going to take a bogey on this hole, too? It was John not being here, of course—he never missed this fairway.

He held out his hand for a club and took a moment to steady himself.

Cutter had it right, he thought. Children. A blessing and a curse. That was it exactly.

Eight oh-eight.

The elevator was on security override. Running express, heading right for the tenth floor and the offices of Saint Capital Holdings. A reputable capital management firm, with officers drawn from the cream of the New York financial world. The firm did indeed have a few Tampa-based clients, whose portfolios it managed with just enough expertise to pass SEC muster, but the vast majority of the capital Saint Capital Holdings managed came to them via the Toro brothers. Came to them as cash, in bins like the ones downstairs, which arrived like clockwork every day of the week. Every day of the week, those bins were brought to the tenth floor, the cash unloaded, then counted, recounted, and sorted into nice, neat piles.

Wednesdays, those neat piles left the building in courier packaging, bound for Howard Saint’s cigarette boats.

And today was Wednesday.

Eight oh-nine.

The elevator doors opened.

Castle turned right. He walked to the end of a long corridor. In front of him was a door marked PRIVATE: NO ADMITTANCE. There was no knob. There was no lock. Only a magnetic pad to the right of the door, at waist height.

To his left was a wall of glass windows, looking out on the same street where only minutes before he'd watched the crowd cross. The rain had let up for a moment. A woman holding a plastic bag over her head paused, and then lowered her arms. She looked gratefully up to the sky.

Just wait, Castle thought.

He ran the security pass over the pad, and the door clicked open. Drawing the shotgun again, he stepped quickly inside.

In front of him was an empty desk. To his left, a file cabinet. To his right, a half-open door. Sounds came from behind it. Quiet sounds—paper shuffling, the muted tap-tap-tap of fingers on a keyboard, Muzak.

Castle peered through the opening. Three men, their backs to him, at a long metal table. Two in suits, sorting, counting, and baling stacks of bills. Hundred-dollar bills. Tens of millions of dollars worth of hundred-dollar bills, if his calculations were right. The third in sweatpants and a T-shirt, eating what looked like stew directly from a pot and watching a TV on the table in front of him, the sound turned all the way down.

He had a gun tucked into his waist.

Castle reached over him, tapped the shotgun on the table.

Beef stew guy went for his gun. Castle grabbed the stew off the table, threw it in his face, and clocked him with the pot.

The two accountants looked up at the same time.

"You're not Eddie," one said.

Castle cocked the shotgun. "Get up."

This was unfuckin'-believable.

They'd been sitting in traffic for twenty minutes now, there was never traffic on Ticknor this time of the morning.

That's why Dante always went this way.

"We're gonna be late," Spoon said, shaking his head.

"I know we're gonna be late, asshole. What am I, stupid?"

"For goin' this way . . . yeah."

"Shut up."

"Fuck you."

The car in front of them inched forward. Dante let his foot up off the brake, and they moved, too. All of a sudden, he saw the reason for the holdup: some guy in a hard hat, directing traffic. More like holding up traffic, really; he was standing by a manhole, forcing two lanes of traffic down to one. Very, very slowly.

"Come on!" Dante yelled, leaning on his horn.

The little guy paid no attention, but the driver of the car in front of him turned around and gave him a look.

Dante gave him one right back.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Come on, asshole. Make my day."

The driver—a balding man in a suit and tie—took a closer look at him and turned right back around.

"Hey, I'm starvin'," Spoon announced.

So was he, Dante realized.

"Yeah. Open those up, will you?" He nodded to the box of doughnuts. Spoon obliged.

"Okay. We got chocolate, cinammon, jelly—"

"Gimme the jelly," Dante said, holding out his hand. Jelly was his favorite, only . . . that was funny. He didn't recall Nicky sayin' anything about jelly.

Oh, yeah. The fat broad packed the box.

The cars inched forward again.

Dante took a bite of the doughnut. Strawberry jelly. Only somethin' tasted funny—

A second later his mouth was on fire.

"Ahhh!" He spit out the doughnut in his mouth.

"What the fuck—?" Spoon said.

Dante was still spitting. "Tabasco sauce," he said, trying to get the taste out of his mouth. "Fuckin' bitch put Tabasco

sauce on the doughnut. Goddamn! I am gonna—”

Spoon was laughing.

Dante glared at him, already making plans in his head, plans to go back to that doughnut shop after the drop off today and teach that woman a lesson she would never forget. Like Mr. Saint always told him—

The car behind them honked. Dante was about to lose it when he looked up and saw the little guy in the hard hat waving—it was his turn to go. Finally.

As they drove past, turning onto Kennedy, he got a quick glimpse of the worker’s face. Funny. He looked just like Micky Duka.

Dante turned to try to get another look, but the guy had his back to him now, and traffic was moving on Kennedy, so

...

It couldn’t have been Duka, he decided. No way that little shit would work a second job.

Mr. Saint would kill him.

Eight twenty-one.

The accountants pushed a cash bin, full to overflowing, out of the office and into the hallway.

“You cannot possibly think,” one said, “that you’ll be able to—”

Castle slammed him in the chest with the Halliburton case.

“Shut up,” he said. “Fill that.”

The man seemed about to speak again. Castle shook his head in warning.

The man lowered his eyes, knelt on the floor, and began to do as he’d been told.

Castle turned his attention to the window.

From his pocket he took out two large suction cups. He stuck them to the glass, two feet apart, then pulled out a diamond cutter and began cutting.

The second accountant, a small, pencil-necked man with glasses, spoke for the first time.

“Do you know whose money this is? Do you know whose building this is?”

“Howard Saint’s.”

“You know.” Out of the corner of his eye, Castle saw the little man shake his head. “Then you know—he’s going to fuck your life up.”

Castle nodded. “He already fucked my life up.”

He finished cutting, put away the blade, grabbed hold of the suction cups, and yanked.

A perfect oval of glass came away from the window. A light drizzle of rain blew in through the hole it left.

Castle set the oval of glass down on the floor and pointed to the bin.

“Out the window,” he said to the accountant.

“What? That’s—” The little man’s eyes went even wider. “—that’s fifty million dollars, you can’t—”

Castle pumped the shotgun. “Out the window,” he repeated. “Now.”

TWENTY-SIX

Dante settled into his chair behind the long marble security desk in the Saint Tower lobby. He put the coffee and bagel he'd gotten from the street vendor down in front of him and checked the monitors. Everything looked copacetic. The second truck was in the garage, and the elevators were clear. Best of all, the message light on the security line wasn't blinking, which meant the Cubans hadn't called to raise a fuss, so he and Spoon probably weren't even gonna get called on the carpet for bein' late.

"I'm gonna check the bullpen," Spoon announced, picking up a phone. The bullpen was where the cash got counted.

"Yeah. Go on," Dante said, taking a bite of the bagel, then a sip of the coffee. That helped. Finally, that Tabasco taste was going away. When he got hold of that woman tonight, he was gonna—

Somebody screamed.

Dante frowned and looked across the lobby to the courtyard outside the building.

A bunch of people were running around, waving their hands in the air like idiots. As he watched, a man in a suit ran right into a woman and knocked her flat on her ass. Weird.

"There's no answer up there," Spoon said.

Dante shrugged, took another bite. "You know those guys. They don't wanna lose count."

"I guess." Spoon set the phone down and frowned. "What's goin' on outside?"

Dante shook his head. "Beats me."

Maybe somebody famous was here, a movie star or something, a lot of them came to the tower to do their shopping. Though now that he looked again, he saw the people outside were paying more attention to the confetti

that was swirling through the air than they were to the building. They were trying to catch it, he realized.

A huge crash sounded. A car had just smashed into one of the limos parked out front. The driver didn't seem to be concerned about that at all; he pulled some of the confetti off his windshield and ran to join the others in front of the building.

It was green confetti, Dante saw that now. All green.

"I'm gonna see what's goin' on," Spoon said, rising from his chair.

"Yeah," Dante nodded. "I'll come with you."

They pushed their way out the door and into the crowd. The green confetti was everywhere.

Only it wasn't confetti.

It was hundred-dollar bills.

Dante looked up. The bills filled the sky, like rain. They were coming from the tower—pouring out a window about halfway up the building. He counted floors, and his eyes widened.

"Shit," he said to Spoon. "The bullpen."

They ran back inside to the elevators. Dante hit the call button and began pacing.

"This is your fault," Spoon said.

Dante stopped pacing and glared. "How do you figure that?"

"Because you made us late, and somethin' screwed up while we weren't here, genius."

"Don't call me genius."

"I ain't takin' the blame for this, Dante. No way."

"Shut up."

"No. Mr. Saint is gonna kill us, and—"

"Shut up." Dante hit the call button again, shaking his head.

Spoon shook his head, too.

"We're dead men," he said.

The elevator across from them dinged.

Dante turned, started for it—

And stopped in his tracks.

A dead man stepped out, and stared right at them.

Eight thirty-nine. On, in fact, slightly ahead of, schedule, even with the rain delay. The success of his intricately laid-out plan pleased him.

Intellectually.

On a more primal level, Frank Castle was still dissatisfied. Restless. The hunger within him burned.

Maria. Will.

The elevator doors opened.

He looked up and, for the first time since that horrible morning three months earlier, smiled.

How the fuck can he still be alive, was Dante's first thought.

What is with that shirt, was his second.

Frank Castle, whom Dante had last seen bleeding, burning, and flying through the air, was now standing in front of him. In a badass black leather jacket, wearing a T-shirt with a creepy-looking skull on it.

Almost as creepy-looking as Castle, whose skin was about ten shades paler than it had been the last time he'd seen the man, whose eyes were like little black dots, whose expression told Dante that he ought to be drawing his gun right then and there.

But this was just plain wrong. Nobody lived after taking the kind of punishment Castle had taken that morning. And yet here he was, in living black and white.

"Good business, murder?" Castle asked, in a creepy, gravelly voice; he sounded just like that guy who was always on the talk shows, Harvey something. "Does Saint pay you for each one? Or do you give him a group-rate discount?"

Dante was trying to think of what to say, if he should say anything, when Castle took a step forward.

The movement broke the spell.

Dante went for his gun. Next to him, he saw Spoon going for his, too. This time, he was gonna make sure. This time, Castle was going to—

Something hit him in the chest. Bile rose in his throat. Tasted like . . .

Tabasco sauce?

All of a sudden he was lying on the ground.

Dante blinked once, then closed his eyes.

Castle allowed himself fifteen seconds to soak in the moment.

The decision to wear this shirt had been the correct one. He'd seen Saint's goons, both of them, stare at it flat-footed, wasting precious seconds that they could have used to run. Few people would be so stupid as these two, but still . . .

He would wear the shirt again.

He'd found it the day he'd returned to the compound with Candelaria, knotted in a clump of seaweed, buried in the sand. He'd almost left it there until he remembered why Will had given it to him. What the skull meant.

That he was a badass. Not to be messed with.

Eight forty-one.

He took in the dead bodies one more time, picked up the Halliburton case full of cash, then exited through a little-used side door, melting away into the crowd.

Howard Saint was in a much better mood.

It was partly the Danish, which Lincoln had gone back to the clubhouse to fetch for him after the ninth hole. Good Danish. They had a Swedish woman working here in the kitchen, did a nice job with all the pastries but with the Danish, in particular.

It was partly the cart, which Lincoln had come back with at the same time. Saint normally liked to walk the course, but as the rain kept coming, his new golf shoes—the ones Livia had picked up for him last week at Gianfreddi's—kept getting dirtier and dirtier, and he was not happy about that. Why he'd sent Lincoln to the clubhouse in the first place.

But most of all, Saint was in a better mood because John had at last been found. No need to ask where he'd been (what a tomcat his son was; at some point the kid was gonna have to learn to keep it in his pants), but he was on the way. They should be able to hook up on the fourteenth, play a couple holes, have a chance to talk things over before the photo shoot.

All in all, it was shaping up to be a good morning. His shot was now working, too—two over for the course right at this point, and, considering the rain, that wasn't bad at all. That was very good, in fact.

The cart stopped. Saint got out. The eleventh was the toughest hole on the course as far as he was concerned, you had the dogleg and then this rise up to the green. Too steep for the cart to make it, had to get the shoes dirty again. Couldn't even see the pin from down where he was right now.

But he'd hit a good shot to the green, he knew that. Even though the flag was missing for some reason—he'd have to talk to the groundskeeper about that, first guy on the course in the morning, it should be perfect for him—he should be able to hole it out in one. Stay on par.

"Ten bucks I get it inside the leather from here," he said.

Walking alongside him, Cutter smiled.

"Can't take that bet, Mr. S. Not the way you're hittin' 'em this morning."

"You're a smart man, Cutter," Saint said. His phone rang. Lincoln handed it to him.

John again.

"Yes?"

"Pop, you're not going to believe this."

Believe what, he was about to ask, thinking this was going to be another lame excuse on his son's part for not showing up, which was going to require another long talk about the responsibilities of being a Saint, when he reached the top of the hill and saw the eleventh green.

And stopped dead in his tracks.

“Oh, I might,” he said to John.

Because whatever his son had to tell him, it couldn’t be as unbelievable as the sight before him right now.

A headstone, in the middle of the eleventh green. Rammed right into the ground where, he saw, the pin had been set. The flag lay crushed underneath it. His ball lay next to it.

It was Frank Castle’s headstone. It had his name on it. Beloved husband, father, son, all that crap. Date of birth, too.

But the date of death had been chiseled off.

“I know it sounds crazy, Pop,” John was saying, “but that Castle guy—he’s back. And the Wednesday shipment—”

Already, Howard Saint didn’t want to hear it. He handed the phone back to Lincoln.

“Cancel the shoot,” he told Cutter, starting back down the hill. “And have everybody meet me back at the house.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Brent knew something was up. The man kept staring at him during the whole meeting, shaking his head almost imperceptibly.

I can't do this, Weeks thought. I can't cover for Saint if things like this are going to keep happening.

He and Special Agent Brent had just spent the last hour briefing Police Chief Morris on the extent of their investigations into Howard Saint and Saint Holdings. Brent was running those investigations, and, for the last few months, Weeks had been subtly sabotaging them. Letting Saint know when and where surveillance or an undercover op was headed his way. For a while there, his misdirection seemed to be working. Brent and his team were getting frustrated, even thinking about calling off the investigation.

Not now. Not after the madness that had occurred this morning at the Saint building. Two dead bodies, fifty million dollars falling from the sky, fifty million dollars that, according to Saint's people, did not even exist . . .

"You've given us some good leads here," Chief Morris said, rising from his chair. "Thanks. We'll start tracking some of this stuff down."

"I wish we had more for you," Brent said, reaching across the table and shaking Morris's hand. "Resources are kind of tight these days."

"I understand—believe me." He held up the folder Brent had given him, then turned to Weeks. "I appreciate you getting involved in this, too, Agent Weeks."

"Whatever I can do." He and Morris shook hands as well. "Come on. I'll walk you out."

Weeks could feel Brent's eyes on him as the two of them left the room.

"We'll keep working NCIC for you, Chief," Weeks said as the two of them made their way downstairs. NCIC was the

bureau's National Crime Information Center, the biggest database of its kind in the country. "See what we can find on the two dead guys."

Morris nodded. "Still having a hard time thinking that Howard Saint's involved in any of this, I have to say. The good that man's done for the city . . ."

Weeks took a sip of coffee from the plastic cup in his hand. Cold, had been cold the last half hour, but God knows he needed the caffeine.

"Let's not rush to judgment," he said. "For all we know, this may not have anything to do with Saint."

"I'm glad to hear you say that." Morris hesitated. "Can we speak frankly, Agent Weeks?"

"Of course."

Morris lowered his voice. "Your man Brent seems to have it in for Howard Saint."

Weeks almost smiled. This was going to be a lot easier than he thought.

"Kevin's been investigating him for a long time, Chief. Put a lot of work into the case, with very little to show for it."

"With nothing to show for it, as far as I can tell." Morris shook his head. "I am not going to make this case into a referendum on Howard Saint."

"I understand that. And I agree a hundred percent. For what it's worth."

"So you'll keep your friend on a leash?" Morris's eyes bore into his.

Weeks suddenly wondered if he was on Saint's payroll, too.

"I'll make sure he understands that you're looking for facts. Not his interpretation of facts."

"Good."

They'd reached the front door. Weeks pushed it open and was almost instantly overwhelmed by a crowd of reporters who'd gathered on the steps of the Federal Building, clearly

hoping for a further scrap of news on the day's biggest story.

"Chief Morris!"

"Chief! The shooting at the Saint building!"

"Just a couple questions, Chief!"

A handful of patrolmen managed to hold the reporters at bay long enough for Weeks and Morris to move past the gauntlet and start down the stairs.

Starting down them was about as far as Weeks got.

He dropped his coffee cup.

Frank Castle stood at the bottom of the steps, waiting for him.

His old friend, his Fort Lee running buddy, his Desert Shield compadre, the best man at his wedding, the only man he'd trusted with the truth about why his marriage had fallen apart, the best agent he'd ever worked with . . .

The man whose death—whose family's death—had been on his conscience for the past three months, every minute of every hour.

It couldn't be.

"What's the matter, Jimmy? See a ghost?" Castle asked.

He couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"Frank?" he croaked.

Next to him, Morris had stopped, too.

"Castle?"

Weeks heard movement—the shuffle of feet—behind them on the marble steps. The crowd of reporters, still trying to get to Chief Morris.

A voice came from over his shoulder.

"Wait a minute . . . *the* Frank Castle? Mr. Castle . . . a few questions!"

Weeks turned and saw Danny Palmer, from the *Tampa Times*, push to the head of the crowd. Christ. Palmer had already sniffed out a few things Mr. Saint would have preferred to keep private; if he hooked up with Castle—

"Hold 'em back!" Morris yelled.

More cops surged up the steps to handle the media; Weeks and the chief started down them again, toward Castle.

Frank didn't look good. His skin was as white as—well, as a ghost, just like his old friend had said. Except, with all that black he was wearing—leather jacket, pants, boots—he looked more like someone from one of those goth bands his daughter always used to listen to: Rage Red, Cardiak. The skull T-shirt only added to the effect. Made him look a little comical. Cartoonish, almost.

Except there was nothing at all cartoonish about the look on his face.

"Jimmy," Castle said. "Morris."

His friend's voice was different, too, Weeks realized. Harsher, more gravelly. As if he'd been drinking all night.

"Jesus, Frank . . ." Weeks tried to think of something intelligent to say. "What are you . . . where have you been?"

"I forget."

Weeks and Morris exchanged a look. The chief stepped forward.

"Castle, I'm not holding this conversation on the sidewalk. A number of individuals are going to have questions—"

"About Puerto Rico?" Castle interrupted. "Don't bother. I got shot. I woke up. That's what I remember."

"You remember that a lot of other people died there, too, I trust?" Morris asked. "There's a whole task force of agencies going to want to talk to you about what you saw—"

"Nothing. You subpoena me, that's what I'll say. That, and one more thing." Castle pulled out his wallet, took something out of it, and handed it to Weeks. His FBI shield.

"I quit," he said.

The two men locked eyes then, and it was all Weeks could do not to fall to his knees and beg forgiveness right then and there.

"You can quit the bureau if you want," Morris said, "but that doesn't absolve you of your responsibilities as a citizen,

Castle. I want you to—”

“What you want,” Frank interrupted, “doesn’t matter.”

The two of them glared at each other a moment.

Weeks didn’t know what to do. He should call Saint and tell him Castle was back. He should tell Frank to run for his life. He should run for his *own* life.

“If you’re not going to cooperate,” Morris began, “then you leave me no choice but to—”

“Whoa.” Weeks stepped between the two of them. “Chief, this man has been through hell. Who’s he supposed to trust right now? Let’s get him to a safe house.”

Frank wasn’t having any of it. “I don’t want a safe house. I don’t want witness protection, I don’t want anything. It’s been months since my family was killed. I don’t see one man in jail. All I want to know is, who gave me up.”

Weeks nodded, trying to look sympathetic while, inside, his heart was pounding like a jackhammer.

Morris tried again.

“Obviously, you’re upset—”

“Upset?” Frank wasn’t having any of that, either. “Is that the word? I used to get upset when I had a flat tire. I used to get upset when a plane was delayed. I used to get upset when the Yankees won the Series. So if that’s what upset means— then how do I feel now? If you know the word, tell me, ’cause I don’t know the word for what I really feel.”

“Frank.” Weeks shook his head. “If these people know you’re still alive, they will kill you. We’re trying to protect you.”

Castle turned the full force of his gaze on Weeks.

“Don’t bother keeping me a secret. I’m in the phone book. Don’t be a stranger, Jimmy.”

And with that, he walked away.

Weeks watched him cross the street and climb into a car that was double-parked directly opposite the Federal Building. A beat-up old Plymouth GTO.

The car pulled out into traffic and was soon lost from sight.

Morris stepped up alongside him.

"Is he permitted to carry?" the chief asked.

"Yeah. Class Three." Weeks knew what Morris was really asking. "You think he did the two guys in the Saint building?" Which was, of course, exactly what Jimmy thought.

Morris didn't respond for a moment.

"If that man insists on playing cowboy in my city, I'll have him arrested, and if he resists, I'll have no choice but to authorize the use of lethal force."

He turned to face Weeks again, and Jimmy saw he was deadly serious. Just as serious as Castle had been.

People were going to die. A lot of them.

The important thing, Jimmy Weeks decided, was to make sure he wasn't one of them.

Excusing himself as quickly as he could, he made a call on his cell, to a number he had dialed all too frequently over the last few months.

"How is he still alive?" Howard Saint leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the desk, and shook his head. "I don't know. I can't answer that, Quentin. I wasn't there."

Glass stood there, hands behind his back, flushed with embarrassment.

He deserved the long, hard stare Howard Saint was giving him right now. He'd fucked up. He should've known better. The only thing that angered him was that he *had* known better, and he'd let John Saint talk him out of it.

At least John was getting the same treatment he was—normally Howard let his son off much easier. This time, Quentin was happy to see, he'd called John in as well to discuss how—and why—they'd failed at their mission.

The three of them—along with Lincoln and Cutter—were in Howard's office in the mansion. Normally, Howard didn't

conduct business at home, but, once again, these were not normal times.

Saint's gaze went from Glass to his son, and then he waved a hand dismissively.

"The how of it, though—that's all in the past."

Both Quentin and John nodded. Glass breathed a quiet, barely audible sigh of relief.

They'd been forgiven.

"Why is he still alive, this Frank Castle—now that's a more interesting question."

John Saint frowned. "What do you mean, Pop?"

"Maybe he's still alive because he was meant to suffer even more."

Quentin Glass smiled. "I think that might be the case indeed, Howard."

He would certainly welcome a chance to contribute to Castle's suffering. That was the problem with moving up in the organization the way he had—he never got a chance to use his knife anymore. Last time was with Reston, and that was—what, back in June? Months, now. And Reston'd been half dead before Quentin even got there.

"But we can't make him suffer if we can't find him, Quentin." It was the elder Saint's turn to frown now. "By now he's in a witness protection program somewhere."

John stepped forward. "No, Pop."

"Castle refused witness protection," Quentin said. Weeks had called in barely an hour ago with that juicy little piece of information. "He rented an apartment in North Tampa. Dial four-one-one, you'll get his number. He's daring us."

"No. He misses his family, and he wants to die," Howard replied. "He's asking for help, so let's give him some."

Glass could feel the handle of the knife in his palm already. "It'll be my pleasure, Howard."

Saint shook his head. "No."

"Howard—"

“Quentin, no. I appreciate it, but with what went down today at the Tower, with the governor’s race . . . anything goes wrong, I can’t afford any more bad publicity. I want to bring in someone from out of town.”

Glass nodded, trying to keep the disappointment he felt inside from showing on his face.

“Anyone in particular you have in mind, Howard?”

“The Caiati brothers, Pop,” John suggested. “They do good work. A little messy sometimes, but—”

“No. I want somebody not connected to us at all. A real pro. You make some calls, all right, Quentin?”

Glass nodded. “It’s done.”

“Okay.” Saint put his feet down, and leaned forward on the desk. “So. Damage control. Who’s talking to the press?”

“Rebecca’s going to do it herself,” Glass replied. “Give a written statement tonight, be available for questions tomorrow morning.”

“I saw the statement,” Saint nodded. “Tell her I want to change the numbers. We only lost one million out the window, okay?”

Glass frowned. “Howard, the police already returned three million to us. How’s that gonna play?”

“Who cares?” Saint shrugged. “I just want that smaller number floating around out there, so, come the election, when whoever I’m running against starts in with commercials saying I’m a wealthy asshole who’s completely out of touch with the way normal people live . . . I can say that reports of my wealth have been greatly exaggerated.”

“Great idea, Mr. Saint,” Cutter said, stepping forward from the shadows a second. “If I might be allowed to say so.”

Howard smiled. “You might.”

Glass rolled his eyes. Ass kisser.

“Okay. What about the Toros?” Saint asked. “Have the Toros called?”

Quentin sighed. Not only had they called, he, unfortunately, had been the only one available to answer

the phone. Mike and Joe had heard what had happened to their money, and they were not happy. They had no qualms about letting their displeasure be known: they'd kept him on the line a good ten minutes before finally hanging up, in the process calling him—and then Howard—every name in the book that Glass had ever heard, and a few that he hadn't.

"Oh, they called." Quentin nodded. "They'll be here in the morning."

Saint's eyes widened. "You invited them to my house?"

"You know I would never do that, Howard." Glass shook his head. "They invited themselves."

TWENTY-EIGHT

The sauce was bland. The cheese was stale. The pepperoni tasted like ham, and the crust wasn't cooked all the way through.

Dave had ordered from Mr. P's again. Stanley had told him time and time again not to order from Mr. P's, but Dave just didn't listen to him. Stanley didn't know why. Not only was their pizza the worst in the city, their drivers were terrible, too. By the time the pizza arrived, it was ice cold.

Still, Stanley thought, it was pizza. And it was Wednesday, so they got three for the price of one. Maybe that was why Dave always ordered from Mr. P's.

Come to think of it, on Wednesdays so did he.

Stanley started in on slice number nine, just as the commercial on Channel 14 ended and the big EYEWITNESS NEWS banner floated across the screen.

"Our top story—two men, employees of Howard Saint, were gunned down in the lobby of the Saint Capital Holdings building during morning rush hour. Outside, the building commuters were experiencing something our own Accu-Weatherman could've never predicted—a hailstorm of cold cash."

Cold cash. Stanley liked that phrase. It made money sound so . . . refreshing. Good enough to eat, almost.

"Fifty million dollars was thrown from the tenth floor of the same building. Authorities investigating the scene are unclear as to whether the incidents are related, who the money belonged to, or any motive involved. No arrests have been made at this time. . . ."

Stanley suddenly realized that the commercial on Channel 8 was over, too, and that Maxine was talking. She was his favorite newscaster. He liked her hair, pretty, long blonde hair, and the way she smiled.

He shifted his attention to her.

“ . . . the two men shot by an unknown assailant were apparently guarding the money, of which fifteen million is still unaccounted for. Spokesmen for Howard Saint, chairman of Saint Holdings and owner of the building, had no comment. In other news . . . ”

Stanley frowned as Maxine started talking about the senator's wife again; they were always going on about her, and though he loved to listen to Maxine talk, tonight he was looking for more on one news item in particular. Not the senator's wife, not the big holdup . . .

He sat back on the couch and scanned Dave's big bank of TVs slowly. Carefully. Ah.

Channel 16. UPN.

“ . . . picture of Francis Castle, the FBI agent presumed dead after his family's gangland-style execution in June, is alive and back in Tampa. Now for the weather, here's . . . ”

Stanley shifted his gaze again. There. Channel 1, local cable. More about Frank Castle.

“ . . . according to sources, was in Tampa participating in a Federal Bureau of Investigation arms seizure that resulted in several arrests back in June, as well as the death of Robert Saint, son of local businessman— ”

“ Look at this, Bumpo. He got a citation from the president. ”

Stanley turned. Dave was across the room, at his big computer. It was beautiful—that, and all these TVs.... Stanley used to wonder where Dave got the money for all his stuff from, because Dave didn't have a job that he knew about. One time he asked Joan, and she said Dave had financed his entire life on credit cards, which sounded like a good idea to Stanley, until Joan explained that was why Dave never answered his phone or went outside, which Stanley didn't entirely understand, as he never went outside either. He kept his confusion to himself, though; from the way Joan talked, he decided that he didn't want any credit cards after all.

Not like anyone had ever offered one to him.

"From the president?" Stanley asked.

"Uh-huh. President of Argentina. Plus a Bronze Star, plus the Medal of Honor, plus a Distinguished Service Cross . . ."

Dave was clicking away on his computer. Different web pages kept flashing by.

"He did two tours with Special Forces. Delta Force. Speaks six languages—"

"What's Delta Force?"

Dave shook his head. "He's like Rambo. Only real!"

"Wow." Stanley couldn't believe it. Their neighbor was Rambo.

At that second, a familiar sound came from outside. Stanley got up and went to the window.

The GTO was just pulling into the garage.

"It's him!" he said, turning.

Dave got up and went to his door, pushed it open a crack. Stanley squeezed in behind him.

"Easy, Bumpo. Don't shove."

"I want to see."

"You can see. Just take it easy."

The front door of the building opened. Heavy footsteps sounded in the entryway and then started down the corridor. He was coming. Frank Castle. Rambo.

"He looks mad," Dave whispered. "He looks really mad."

"He always looks mad."

"Madder than usual."

Stanley stood on tiptoe, trying to peer over Dave's shoulder. All he could see was the wall.

Darn it. He wanted to look, too.

The footsteps got closer. Came right up on them, and then went past, down the hall.

"He's going to his apartment," Dave said. "He's taking out his key—"

Stanley leaned on Dave's shoulder and tried to peer around his friend.

He leaned too hard.

The two of them tumbled out into the corridor. Stanley landed on top of Dave, who pushed him off in a hurry and scrambled to his feet.

Castle was down the hall from them, at the door to his apartment, key out. Just like Dave said.

He did look madder than usual.

"Hi," Dave said. "Hi, there."

"How are you, Frank?" Stanley asked.

Castle looked at them a second, then opened the door to his apartment. Stanley smiled at him.

Castle took a second, longer look at Dave and him, then walked into his apartment and slammed the door shut.

"You called him Frank," Dave said.

"That's his name."

"Yeah, but—"

"But what? He lives here. I'm just being neighborly."

"I don't think he wants to be neighborly," Dave said.

Stanley frowned.

"Why wouldn't he want to be neighborly?"

"Because . . ." Dave sighed and shook his head. "Never mind, Bumpo. Never mind."

The two of them went back in Dave's apartment then.

I'll have to ask Joan, Stanley thought. She knows about stuff like this.

Stanley Richard Bumpo, age thirty-two, developmentally disabled, orphaned two years ago, rent and food paid for from a trust administered by his mother's brother, Alex Graves, who was siphoning off funds from the account to pay for his mistress's apartment downtown. Two years from now, approximately, the trust would run dry and Stanley would be out on the street.

David A. Grayson, real name David Daniels, age twenty-nine, graduate Wooster Polytechnical Institute, two years working for the NSA on a highly classified 128-bit encryption method, fired for persistent tardiness, fired from his

following three jobs for the same reason, currently being sought by the federal government for income tax evasion and for questioning in an identity theft ring.

Meet the neighbors.

Quite a pair, Castle thought, setting his father's Colts down on the table. Quite a first impression.

He suspected he'd made a slightly better one today.

He wondered what sort of actions Howard Saint was taking in response. Duka—the man had done well today, no hitches, no last-minute foul-ups—would relay any relevant information the second he heard it. Not that anything Saint could do at this point would matter.

A little more than a week from now, those SAINT FOR GOVERNOR signs he was seeing all over town would be coming down.

Right about the same time that they were loading Saint's body up for the morgue. Not that he was planning to stick around and gloat, but . . .

He poured himself a glass of whiskey. The message light on his answering machine was blinking. Two calls. He played them back.

The first was from Jimmy Weeks. Wanting to meet him tomorrow, to talk. Pointless. If Weeks knew who'd given him up to Saint, he would have told him. And Castle had nothing else to discuss with the man.

His eyes went to the Colts then, and he thought that maybe he'd leave them to Jimmy. His father would've liked that. Frank Sr. and Weeks, they'd always gotten along. He'd consider it.

The second message was from Litton. Calling from London—Castle could hear that funny, transatlantic static on the line before the man started to talk.

"Captain. I just heard the news of your remarkable resurrection."

Castle took a sip of his drink, and almost—almost—smiled. Litton always called him captain, from when he'd served

under Castle, in Bosnia. On Thunderbolt, Gatekeeper—a half-dozen covert missions, joint Delta Force/SAS operations.

“I know you have unfinished business there. I’d offer my help, but I suspect this is something you want to handle on your own. When you’ve taken care of it, do call. You know the number.”

Castle did.

“For what it’s worth, Captain—I’m sorry. About your father, Maria, Will . . .”

Castle thought he heard a catch in the man’s voice then. Litton had a son, too—a few years younger than Will. If anyone could begin to understand . . .

Footsteps in the hall. Castle paused the message.

He heard the door closest to his open, then shut.

His other neighbor. Joan.

Joan Ellen Ames, twice married, twice divorced, two convictions on her record: one DUI, one possession of marijuana. She was currently employed as a waitress at Schurr’s Diner, corner of Wayne and Hudson. Mother of an eight-year-old son, Steveland Van Dyke, whom she had abandoned four years ago. Abandoned her own child.

Castle shook his head. Some people didn’t know how lucky they were.

His eyes went to the photo of his wife and son.

You and I, we’re not lucky. We’re blessed.

He squeezed the whiskey glass in his hand tight. Too tight. It shattered into a hundred pieces.

Castle watched the shards fall to the ground.

Then he got to his feet.

No time for this. He had a lot of work to do.

Tomorrow was Thursday.

TWENTY-NINE

It had been, Howard Saint reflected, a very, very bad night, the capper to one of the all-time worst days of his life. When he'd come to bed and told Livia that the Toros would be paying them a visit in the morning, she'd gotten furious, as mad as he'd ever seen her, and even more so when he asked her (very nicely asked her, he thought) to at least, for his sake, be civil to Mike and Joe. After all, he'd said, they were very important clients.

And, even though he had been in bed, nuzzling her from behind at the time (Christ, he needed sex after a day like yesterday), she'd actually gotten up and gone to sleep in the maid's room. Wouldn't come back no matter what he said or did.

Howard couldn't understand it. No, the Toros were not his favorite people, either, but business was business.

He was so wired and upset and obsessed with how the fuck that prick Castle had pulled his little stunt that at one-thirty in the morning he'd had Cutter phone out for the Nunzio sisters, whom he did in the guesthouse, out of respect for Livia, which at last relaxed him enough that he was able to fall asleep, back in the big bed, by about four.

Normally, after staying up that late, he'd sleep in till noon. But the Toros were coming at ten, so here he was, at quarter to, already dressed and entering the solarium, Cutter a step behind him.

"What do we have for breakfast this morning, Mrs. Caprese?" Saint called out as Cutter pulled his chair away from the table.

His cook stood next to the kitchen door, a big smile on her face. Always a good sign, when Mrs. C. was smiling.

"I make a nice frittata for you, Mr. Saint. Mushroom, ham, black olive, mozzarella . . ."

“Sounds beautiful. A little coffee first, Cutter—if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, Mr. S.”

Cutter went to fetch the pot from the sideboard, and Mrs. Caprese went back into the kitchen.

Saint unfolded the newspaper by his plate, saw the headline—TAMPA’S PERFECT STORM—and the picture of his money floating down to the ground in a cloud, and closed it right back up.

Negative thoughts. The morning promised to be difficult enough without negative thoughts.

Cutter poured his coffee. Saint took a sip and sat back in his chair.

Forget the news, today had to be better than yesterday. For one thing, the sun was shining. For another, Chadwick and he were having lunch again, finalizing the campaign committee. For a third, Quentin had called and was on his way over with news about the outside talent he’d found to take care of Castle. For a fourth . . .

The kitchen door swung open, and Mrs. C. walked out, carrying a beautiful-looking plate full of food.

She set it down before him and stepped back.

“You’ve outdone yourself today, Mrs. Caprese.”

She beamed.

A car horn honked.

Howard Saint looked out the window, over the deck, and past the pool.

The Toros were here already, climbing out of their unmistakable lime green Caddy and walking toward the house. Not looking happy.

Neither was he.

Pushing back his chair, leaving behind a very distraught-looking Mrs. Caprese as well as his breakfast, Saint exited the solarium onto the deck above the pool.

“Mike Toro, Joe Toro!” He waved to them, a very forced smile on his face, as he descended the staircase down to

the pool. "Something to drink?"

"No, thanks, Howard," Mike replied.

Joe was squinting up at the sun. "Nice weather, Howard, don't you think?"

"Better than yesterday," Saint said.

Mike Toro shook his head. "I've seen hurricanes, seen it rain like cats and dogs, but never in all my years have I seen it rain hundred-dollar bills."

"This rainmaker," Joe said. "Castle. He was supposed to be dead."

"He's a very lucky man," Saint said. "My men put a lot of bullets in him."

"Your men need shooting lessons," Mike said.

Saint shook his head. He wouldn't be lectured. Not in his own home.

"We've done business for ten years, Mike. This is the first time that something has gone wrong."

"At a personal loss to us of fifty million dollars, Howard, that's one time too many. You guaranteed that money. Do you want us to find another backer?"

Saint glared at him. Little Cuban prick, he thought, and almost said. Go on, see if you can find somebody else who'll do for you what I've done.

Then he remembered Big Richie was in town again.

"You don't have to do that," he said.

"I'm glad," Joe said. "Because we like doing business with you, Howard. We really do."

"Of course, we want our money back," Mike put in. "Every dollar that went out the window."

Saint could only nod. The cops were on that for them—he'd talked to Kuipers last night—and they'd already gotten back close to thirty of the fifty. He'd just have to make up the difference—skip his cut on the next few shipments.

"And as long as this Castle is running around playing Robin Hood—"

"Not for too much longer, Mike. I can assure you of that."

Toro didn't seem assured. "As long as this Castle is running around playing Robin Hood," he repeated, "we want protection on the next shipment. It's fifty million dollars, Howard. Do you guarantee our money?"

"With everything I own." Saint spread his arms wide then, to indicate the mansion and the grounds, which technically he didn't own, but how were these thugs gonna know that?

Mike suddenly smiled. "Everything?" he asked, looking over Saint's shoulder.

Howard turned and saw Livia coming from the tennis courts then, dressed in her whites. She had been smiling, but the second she saw the Toros, her expression changed.

Saint locked eyes with Mike then, who just kept smiling.

He couldn't think of a single thing to say that wouldn't have ended in bloodshed, right then and there, so he kept his mouth shut.

The Toros left. Quentin came out from the downstairs lounge, still dressed in the clothes he'd been wearing the night before.

"What did they want?" he asked.

"What do you think?" Saint shook his head. "What've you been doin' all night?"

"Working."

Saint frowned. Quentin didn't smell like he'd been working. He smelled like he'd been having sex. Saint didn't know why his friend would want to lie about that, but . . . whatever.

"So? Tell me something good."

Glass smiled. "In forty-eight hours, Castle is a memory. A pro from Memphis. The best."

"Memphis?" Saint frowned. Memphis—that was Johnny Piscatelle's territory. Johnny had funny ideas sometimes when it came to his guys, and guns.

"What about the Russian?"

Glass shook his head. "He's in Colombia."

Fuck. The Russian was always in Colombia.

Saint was about to suggest trying to get him anyway—money was no object here—when he looked across the lawn and saw the Toros reach their car at precisely the same moment that Livia walked by.

His wife and Mike Toro exchanged words. Then Mike made an obscene gesture at his wife. She made one back.

Saint gritted his teeth. He knew Livia could handle herself just fine, but part of him wanted to run across the lawn and cave Mike Toro's head in with a sledgehammer.

"Howard? You all right?"

"Yeah." Saint took a deep breath. "This guy you got to take care of Castle—he better not mess up, Quentin. That's all I can say."

"He won't. He's good, I'm telling you."

"He better be." Livia stalked away from Mike Toro, who climbed into the Caddy and shouted something after her.

The engine roared: Toro slammed his car into gear and burned rubber down the driveway. Saint watched the Cubans and their pimpmobile disappear in the distance.

"We can't afford another fuckup, Quentin. None of us."

Weeks brought him coffee. Castle pretended to drink it.

He didn't know why he'd changed his mind, why he'd agreed to meet the man. There was nothing they had to say to each other.

"You know I spoke at your funeral," Jimmy said.

Castle nodded; of course he had. He wondered, for a split second, who had spoken at Maria's. Her brother, probably—her parents were both long dead. And what about Will? Had anyone spoken for him?

A priest, of course. A priest who hadn't known him at all. Castle always hated that, when people who hadn't known the deceased talked about them as if they'd been close friends.

He took a sip of the coffee. "What did you say about me?"

"I said it was hard to imagine you dead."

"Anything you can imagine, Jimmy . . . there's always something worse."

The two of them sat side by side on a bench in the little park across from the Federal Building. Weeks seemed nervous, twitchy; he wouldn't look Castle in the eye. As if there was something he wanted to say but was afraid to. Castle suspected he knew what.

With his next words, Weeks confirmed it.

"Frank, I need you to get out of town. Let me handle this. Let me find out who set you up before they find you."

Weeks still wanted to protect him. Castle appreciated the thought, but the man just didn't get it.

"I want them to find me. You understand?"

"You're not thinking straight." Weeks shook his head. "You're going to end up a dead man."

"Give you another chance to speak at my funeral."

Weeks didn't smile.

Castle leaned closer. "I'm already dead, Jimmy. Don't worry about me."

Weeks looked away, shook his head again.

Castle suddenly got the sense there was something else on his friend's mind, something else Weeks wanted to tell him. He didn't have time to try to pry it out of him, though.

"Gotta get goin', Jimmy," he said.

"All right. I tried. I had to try, Frank." Weeks got to his feet. "You got time to grab a little something first?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Hot dog, maybe? You used to like hot dogs. There's a stand down the street."

Castle was about to say no again when he suddenly realized he was hungry. He hadn't eaten since yesterday morning— breakfast in the GTO, while he'd been waiting for the second truck.

So they got hot dogs. Again, Castle got the sense that Jimmy was prolonging the conversation because of

something else he wanted to say. Weeks just kept making small talk, though.

While they were eating, Jimmy's phone rang. He answered it and turned pale.

"Be right back," he said to Castle, and walked around the corner to talk.

Castle watched him go; for the first time since he'd come back to Florida, he remembered the troubles his friend had been having. Dealing with the divorce, with Gwen's lawyer, with the fallout from Ares, the gambling . . .

That had to be it, he thought. Jimmy was still dealing with all those same problems. For a moment, Castle wished he could help. But he had no time: Weeks would have to sink or swim on his own.

His friend came back. Whoever had been on the phone, whatever had been said, Jimmy was still upset, distracted.

He finished his hot dog quickly and stood.

"See you, good buddy. You think about what I said, okay?"

Castle nodded perfunctorily.

"Okay." Weeks nodded across the street. "That's me over there. Gotta run."

Weeks's ride was a late-model Mustang. Castle saw it and frowned.

"What happened to the Porsche, Jimmy? You loved that car."

"Well. You know. I wanted to buy American."

"There should be more people like you."

"Yeah." His friend smiled, or tried to anyway. "See you, Frank."

Castle nodded. "See you."

There was the answer to one of his questions, anyway. Weeks was still gambling. Still losing big-time.

He watched his old friend cross the street, wondering just how bad the problem was, then reminded himself: Not his concern. Not anymore.

That part of him was dead and buried.

He drove the GTO to the mail drops. The packages were there, two of them: the voice distorter from McNally Electronics and the fireplug from United Theater. High tech and low tech, both courtesy of Federal Express: on time, every time.

He unpacked them in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart, threw the mailing labels and packing materials into a Dumpster there, and went back to the apartment. There was a message from Duka.

"I just gotta know, if it's still happening, because I don't mind tellin' you, I'm shittin' a brick here. The construction job, that was one thing, but this . . . this is a whole nother ball of wax. I mean, Glass is—"

Castle stopped the playback, picked up the phone, and dialed.

"Hello?" Duka still sounded nervous.

"It's happening. I'll call you."

"Okay, just try and make it—"

"I'll call you," Castle repeated, and hung up.

He erased Duka's message and poured himself a drink. Pictures of Quentin Glass and his latest boyfriend, of Livia Saint and the movie theater she frequented every Thursday night, were scattered across the kitchen table.

He slugged back another shot of whiskey and checked his Rolex.

Six-ten. Time to pack the duffel and go.

As he got to his feet, he heard shouting out in the hall. A stranger's voice. Male. Angry about something.

Castle set down his glass and walked to the door.

THIRTY

Dave had heard the Harley (no missing that distinctive purr), had heard the front door slam open, had heard boots climb the stairs, but he'd thought it was just Castle with a new ride. He decided to check it out later, because right now he was working on eBay's firewall, trying to get past it and get into their system; he was so damn tired of losing auctions at the last second. He wasn't going to do anything illegal, not exactly, he just wanted a fair shake at—

He frowned; the boots had stopped in front of Joan's door, and the guy, suddenly screaming at the top of his lungs, did not sound like Castle.

Dave pushed back from the computer and got to his feet. He cracked open his door.

A guy in a biker jacket was standing in front of Joan's apartment.

"C'mon, Joanie," the man yelled. "Open the fuck up! You think I'd take that money for myself? Oh, right, Mike is selfish, Mike only thinks about himself, Mike never scores for anybody else, Mike never shares. No, no, and why should I share with you? You hurt my feelings!"

The guy reared back all of a sudden and kicked the door with all his strength. Dave heard wood splinter. He heard Joan scream.

Bumpo's door cracked open, too. The two of them exchanged a look.

Joan yelled something inaudible from behind her door. Mike yelled back.

"Oh, yeah? I want to talk to you about how you hurt my feelings! Now open the goddamn door, you little bitch!"

Bumpo walked out into the hall, looking about as angry as Bumpo ever looked. Dave, not knowing exactly what he was going to do, walked out as well.

Mike paid them absolutely no attention. He was pounding on the door again with his fists.

Dave cleared his throat.

"Ummm . . . dude? It's kind of late."

Mike suddenly stopped pounding. He turned to Dave, cocked his head, and smiled this weird, look-at-me-I'm-a-loon kind of smile.

"Yeah? But what time is it in Hawaii?"

Bumpo stepped forward. "You should go right now."

"Shut your face, lard ass," Mike shot back.

"Or stay," Bumpo said. "Whatever works."

The guy smiled and turned back to Joan's door. "Joan! Let me in!" He kicked it again.

This time, Dave heard wood splinter. Okay. Enough was enough. "I'm gonna call the cops," he announced.

"Yeah?" Mike turned on him again, and this time he started walking forward. "You are?"

Before Dave could respond, Mike slapped him on the head.

"Ow." Dave started to back up, out of Mike's range. He hadn't been in a fight since second grade, when Mary Sue Martin beat the crap out of him for pulling her hair.

Mike hit him again, and smiled. "You fuckin' geek," he said. "I'm gonna give you a few tattoos to go with all your candy-ass piercings." He drew back an arm then, clenched his hand into a big meaty fist.

Dave's stomach rolled over.

The door at the end of the hall opened.

Six-eleven. He really didn't have time for this.

But he opened his door anyway.

Bumpo and Dave were backing away from a junkie who was undoubtedly the source of the yelling he'd heard before.

Castle cleared his throat.

The junkie turned around.

"I'll say this once. Get out."

The junkie smiled. Sweat on his brow, eyes glazed over, hands twitching constantly . . .

Crystal meth, Castle guessed. Idiot.

“People think,” the junkie said, starting confidently down the hall toward him, “oh, Mike. He can’t do his tricks anymore, he doesn’t have the, the, the speed anymore. But watch this.”

The junkie drew a knife, quicker than Castle would have thought possible, given his condition. Butterfly knife—he twirled it in the air, jabbing this way and that, darting around Castle with remarkable speed, eyes gleaming with savage, primitive glee.

Castle punched him square in the face.

The junkie screamed.

“My nose! You broke my nose!”

“Really?” Castle ripped the knife out of the man’s hand, and rapped him on the bridge of the nose with it.

The junkie howled again, even louder.

“You could be right,” Castle said. “I’d see a doctor, if I were you.”

Then Castle broke one of his ribs, and then a finger, and then he kicked the man down the stairs.

Six-twelve.

Dave and Bumpo looked on, wide-eyed.

Joan’s door creaked open. She looked at Castle, at Dave and Bumpo, and then shook her head.

“You stuck up for me.” Grayson was staring at him with undisguised admiration. “Nobody ever stuck up for me before.”

The look in his eyes reminded Castle of something. It took him a second to figure out what.

Will. His son used to look at him like that.

Dave’s nose was bleeding. Bumpo stepped up next to him and pressed a kerchief to his face.

“Let’s put some ice on that.”

"Yeah. Okay." Dave smiled at Castle. "Thanks again, man."

Castle nodded. He had nothing to say to them; he'd seen a problem and solved it. Done. No more contact necessary. He moved to go, too.

Joan stood in the middle of the hallway, blocking his path back to the apartment.

It was the first really good look he'd had at her. She was tall. Five-eight, maybe even five-nine. Taller than Maria had been. Same color eyes, though. Blue. Just like Maria's.

He had to go.

"I'm sorry about that," she said. "About Mike. I met him . . . it doesn't matter where I met him. I made a mistake one night. I mean," she sighed, "he's pathetic now, but a few years ago, he was . . . anyway, now he's my latest ex-boyfriend."

"Good. Excuse me." He moved past her.

"You're Castle," she called after him.

He turned to face her again. "I used to be."

"We saw you on TV."

"I don't have one."

"I'm Joan. Dave's the guy with all the umm . . . metal, and Bumpo's the large guy."

"I know who you are."

"I don't know how to say this," Joan began, "so I'll just . . . anyway, we're really sorry."

"About what?"

"Your family."

She did indeed look sorry. Sympathetic. But he really didn't have time.

"Did you know them?"

"No."

"Then there's no need to be sorry. I'm over it."

Joan looked over his shoulder then, and he realized he'd left his apartment door wide open. He knew what she was

seeing. The bare room. The whiskey bottle on the table. The half-empty glass.

“Don’t let your memories kill you,” she said softly.

“They won’t kill me.” How could they? Like he’d told Weeks, he was already dead.

He picked up the duffel, shut his door, and left the building without looking back. Without speaking another word.

THIRTY-ONE

Seven-ten. He was in the GTO, headed downtown on the interstate. Traffic was light. He made good time.

Seven twenty-nine. He pulled into the parking garage outside the Centurion. Walked two blocks north till he found Livia Saint's Jaguar, then melted into the shadows to wait.

Seven forty-four. Livia Saint came walking down the street, dressed in her workout clothes, gym bag over her shoulder. She unlocked the Jag and dropped the bag inside it, then headed off toward the Centurion.

He didn't know which film she'd be seeing, but it didn't matter. They all started around eight, ended around ten. More than enough time for his purposes.

He waited two minutes.

Seven forty-six. He ventured out of the shadows and pulled the fireplug out of his duffel. He set it down next to the Jag, nodded in satisfaction. Indistinguishable from the real thing.

Next was the shim. Thirty seconds later, he was inside the Jag, ransacking Livia Saint's bag, taking special note of her perfume—Angel, Thierry Mugler—and the velvet case, Harry Winston inscribed on the outside, some obscenely large diamond earrings within. He put both back as he'd found them, then turned his attention to the ignition. Thirty seconds to hot-wire it, a minute to replace the wires so no damage was visible from outside the car.

Seven fifty-three.

He stopped at Cranston and Kennedy, took out the voice distorter, and attached it to the car phone. He dialed Quentin Glass's number.

"Glass."

"Quentin Glass?"

"Who is this?"

“I have certain photographic studies of you and your barber friend. Meet me at the bar in the Wyndham Harbor Island Hotel. Bring five thousand dollars, and I’ll give you the photographs. You wouldn’t want Howard Saint to see them, Mr. Glass.”

Before the man could respond, he hung up.

Glass’s reactions were the only potential stumbling block in his plan. Perhaps he’d been wrong—perhaps Glass didn’t care if Saint found out about his sexual orientation. Though from what he’d observed the last two weeks, Glass was paranoid about anyone finding out.

Castle put the chance of failure at 2 percent, give or take. Which would mean going to plan B. He’d know very soon.

Eight-fifty. He pulled into the parking lot of the Wyndham Hotel, parked the Jag in a clearly marked handicap space, and bled into the shadows.

Nine-thirteen. A Tampa Parking Enforcement vehicle pulled up next to the Jag. A minute later, a uniformed enforcement official climbed out, and plastered a ticket on the Jag’s windshield.

At that exact instant, Quentin Glass pulled up next to the hotel’s valet stand. Looking anything but happy, he tossed his keys to the valet and headed toward the bar.

Castle smiled. In his head, he mentally discarded the notes he’d been gathering for plan B.

Nine-seventeen. He slid back behind the wheel of the Jag, hot-wired the car again, and returned it to the spot the fireplug had held for him by the Centurion.

Nine-thirty. He disconnected the voice distorter, collected the prop fireplug, and melted back into the shadows.

Nine forty-five. Back in the GTO, he made a call on his cell.

“Hello?”

“You’re on.”

Castle hung up. His part for the night was done.

Time for Duka to take center stage.

Okay. Absolutely no reason to be nervous. Nothing to be afraid of. It was bound to come up in conversation, Castle said. If not tonight, then over the next couple days. He just had to stay cool, calm, collected.

“Micky!”

Duka started, and almost dropped the pitcher of margaritas in his hand.

“Pay attention, will you?” John Saint, stretched out on an inflatable raft in the middle of the pool, waved his glass in the air. “I’m empty here.”

Duka nodded. “Sorry, John. I was, ah—” His eyes went to the two blondes floating in the pool alongside John, and he smiled, or tried to anyway. “—distracted. If you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. You dog, Micky.” Saint shook his head and smiled. “Ain’t he a dog, girls?”

The girls nodded and giggled.

Micky topped off John’s glass, emptying the pitcher. The third pitcher of the night. The guy had to have a hollow leg—the girls hadn’t even finished their first drinks.

“I’ll mix up a fresh batch,” Micky said, and headed for the bar.

As he worked, he heard footsteps sound on the deck above him. A second later, those footsteps came down the stairs. Howard Saint. He stopped in front of the pool and put his hands on his hips.

“Quentin’s late. Where is he?”

“No idea, Pop,” John said. “You want a drink? Micky’s makin’ margaritas.”

“No, I don’t want a drink. I want Quentin.”

Duka took a deep breath. Here goes nothing, he thought, and coughed.

“Excuse me. Mr. Saint?”

Saint spun around and glared at him. “What?”

“I know where Mr. Glass is, sir. I saw him pulling into the Wyndham Hotel, couple hours ago.”

"Good. The Wyndham Hotel. Fine. What the fuck is he doing at the Wyndham Hotel? He's supposed to be here."

Duka blanched. "I, uh—"

"And where's your mother gone to?" Saint asked, turning around to his son again. "John?"

"It's Thursday, Pop," the younger Saint replied.

"Right." Howard Saint nodded. "Thursday. The movies."

Right, Micky Duka almost said. The movies. He knew that, too.

Just then, a door slammed upstairs. Duka heard laughter. A woman and a man. Howard Saint heard it, too. Without a word, he went back up the stairs and inside.

Micky exhaled loudly. Thank God that was over with. That was almost as bad as hanging upside down in Castle's apartment.

"Mick! The drinks?"

John Saint was waving his glass again.

"Right, John. Sorry."

"And a couple fresh glasses for the girls here, right girls?"

The girls giggled. Duka smiled.

"Right. Fresh glasses, fresh pitcher, coming right at you."

Only he had trouble getting his hands to work right. They were all sweaty and shaking. Christ, he thought. Get a grip, Duka.

"Hey!" John shouted.

Duka thought it was meant for him for a second, thought the man was going to yell at him again to hurry up. But when he looked, he saw that Saint was yelling at the girls; they had tipped over the raft and dunked him in the pool. The three of them were wrestling in the water now, laughing.

I need this more than they do, Duka thought, and poured himself a margarita.

He drained it in one gulp.

Howard Saint followed the sound of laughter to the foyer, fuming all the way. When he got there, to his surprise he

found both people he'd been looking for: Quentin and Livia. They were standing by the front door, heads bent together, talking quietly. Smiling, joking, enjoying themselves . . .

For a second, Saint continued to fume. He'd been looking for Quentin all night; they had important decisions to make, important things to discuss, no time to waste. But not only had Glass wasted time by going to the Wyndham Hotel for some strange reason, but now the man was wasting even more time, more of *his* time. He was keeping Howard Saint waiting while he enjoyed a nice relaxing chat.

No. Howard Saint hadn't worked his ass off these last thirty years to be kept waiting by anyone.

Then he remembered who had been right there, at his side, for every step of the way during those thirty years, and he forced himself to calm down.

Okay, Quentin, he thought. You get a free pass. Only you, though. Nobody else.

He stepped forward, into the light.

Livia turned and smiled at him.

"Howard? Is that you? I was telling Quentin about the movie."

Saint forced himself to smile. The movie. Another one of those girl films she was always talking to her friends about—fabulous, insightful, touching, blah-blah, blah-blah.

"It was good?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "It was very good."

"I'm glad." Saint turned to Quentin then. "You ready? We got a lot to talk about."

"I know. I'm sorry I was late."

"Not a problem." He smiled at Quentin, and Quentin smiled back. And then something inside—he couldn't say exactly what—made him press just a little. "Where were you, by the way? I called."

"Sorry. I dozed off. Out by the pool."

"Ah." Saint frowned. "Funny."

"What's funny?"

“Micky said he saw you at the Wyndham Hotel.”

“Micky should have his eyes checked.”

“That little shit should have his ass kicked,” Livia put in. “I don’t like having him around, Howard.”

Saint nodded. He knew that. But he didn’t respond to Livia. He just kept looking at Quentin.

“So he’s mistaken—Duka?”

Glass nodded. “Yes, Howard. He’s mistaken.”

“Okay. Fair enough.”

He and Quentin went upstairs to talk. Johnny Piscatelle wanted his commission on the guy he’d sent to whack Castle paid up front. Richie Constantine wanted a friend of his on the campaign committee. Mike Toro wanted to suggest a few changes in the collection schedule. One thing after another, Howard and Quentin went at it, all the ramifications, all the obstacles, the pluses and the minuses to each little action.

The whole time, Saint wasn’t paying as close attention as he should have been. He couldn’t stop thinking about Micky Duka.

Maybe he would do what his wife wanted—get rid of that little shit. But before he did that . . . Howard Saint wanted to talk to Duka again, about Quentin Glass and the Wyndham Hotel.

THIRTY-TWO

She was being silly, and she knew it. He had shown absolutely no interest in her, beyond that one night when he'd kicked skanky Mike down the stairs. It was just more proof that she always went after what she couldn't have, what wasn't good for her.

But still . . .

Joan found herself thinking about Castle a lot these days.

Right now, he sat by himself, down the counter, eating his way through a steak and eggs. He obviously wasn't here to talk to her, though. He'd spent the morning writing in that little book he always carried with him.

"Oh my goodness." Stanley, who sat at the counter in front of her, pushed his plate away and patted his stomach. "These blueberry pancakes are good, Joan. Can I have another order?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Stanley . . ."

They'd talked about his losing weight last night. None of his pants fit anymore; he had to leave the top button open and use his belt to hold them up.

"You're right." He nodded. "You're right, Joan. I have to eat healthier. What's he eating?" Stanley gestured toward Castle.

"He's having eggs, Stanley. Steak and eggs."

"That's what I'll have, then."

"Stanley . . ."

"But I'm hungry."

"I'll get you some yogurt."

Stanley visibly shuddered. "I suppose." He sighed and slumped on his stool. "What's he been doing the last few days, anyway? Where's he been?"

"In his apartment, for the most part. As for what he's been doing . . . not much. Drinking. A lot."

"Why does he drink?"

“Bumpo.” Dave, at the stool next to Stanley, shook his head. “Why do you eat? Why do I spend all day in a video game?”

“Because you don’t have a job?” Joan asked.

Dave shot her a look. “Ha-ha. Because he’s a troubled man. A haunted man. A man whose very deeds and responsibilities are so . . . so . . .”

Joan sighed and turned to get Stanley’s yogurt.

“So awesome,” Dave continued, “that he has to douse his central nervous system in alcohol.”

“Please,” she said. “Spare me.”

Dave shrugged. “It’s either that, or he likes to get hammered.”

Joan put Stanley’s yogurt down in front of him and shook her head. Dave had left out the obvious reason—obvious to her, at least. Castle drank to forget. His wife. His son. She knew how that felt.

Her eyes went to the end of the counter then. Castle—she’d tried thinking of him as Frank, but somehow that just seemed wrong, she didn’t feel as if she knew him well enough to be on a first-name basis yet, even in her head—had put the book away and was now staring off into space.

Go talk to him, a little voice in her head said. The breakfast rush was long over. Old man Schurr had kicked back by the cash register and was reading his papers; he wouldn’t mind if she took a little break, too. Go talk to him.

She smoothed down her skirt, pushed her hair back from her face, and picked up the coffeepot. Refill, Frank? Why thanks, Joan. You’re very kind. Not at all. Anything else to eat? No. Say, what time do you get off? In about an hour. Why? I was wondering if—

The little bell above the entrance rang as the door swung open.

The thinnest man she’d ever seen in her life walked in.

Scary thin. Cheekbones sharp enough to cut yourself on, bony-looking arms, bony-looking legs, and a crown of Lyle

Lovett hair to top it off. He was carrying a guitar case, and wearing clothes that looked to her as if they'd gone out of style twenty years ago, if, in fact, they'd ever been in style.

Jee-sus. The goofballs they got in here . . .

The man walked to the corner booth, right behind Castle, and sat. Joan brought a menu over.

"Morning, sir. Coffee?"

"That'd be fine."

She poured.

He smiled, and looked her right in the eye.

Joan tried smiling back, but the intensity of his gaze was unnerving. All at once, the man seemed like anything but a goofball. All at once, in fact, he seemed downright scary.

"I'll be right back to take your order," she said, and hurried away as fast as she could.

There was a mirror opposite the breakfast counter. Castle used it to study the man as he entered, and quickly dismissed him. Musician. Another junkie probably, judging from his wasted, skeletal-like appearance.

When the man took the booth directly behind him, though, Castle gave him a second look. Just to be sure. And then he was instantly on his guard.

The man was staring right at him, right in the mirror. Eyes clear, intelligent, piercing. He lit a cigarette and took a long, slow drag off it, then a longer, slower sip of his coffee, his eyes locked on Castle the whole time.

Not a junkie. Not a musician. But not necessarily Saint's man, either. Besides, even if Saint had sent him . . . he wouldn't try anything in here. There were too many witnesses. Castle frowned. On the other hand, if he was indeed Saint's man, he might not care about witnesses, except to kill them.

Castle's eyes went to Joan, who was talking in hushed tones with Grayson and Bumpo, just down the counter.

He shifted slightly in his seat then so that the handle of the Colt tucked in his waistband was in easy reach.

The man set down his coffee and turned to the guitar case on the seat next to him. Humming softly to himself, he began flipping open the latches of the case.

Castle tensed, ready for anything.

The man opened the lid. The fluorescent bulbs of the diner lights reflected off something inside it.

Castle let his hand drop to his side, inches from the Colt.

The man reached into the case and pulled out a guitar.

Castle exhaled.

The man strummed a chord. Out of tune. He fixed it, then in a gravelly voice began to sing.

"I have taken the blood of an innocent life

And I ran from the light like I ran from the law.

You know the wages of sin catches up with us all.

But he kept his hand on me,

He kept my faith alive.

It will carry me home, I pray,

On the day that I die."

As he finished singing, the man looked up in the mirror again. Looked long and hard right in Castle's eyes. Castle took it about as long as he could, then turned to face him.

"Do I know you?"

"No. But I know you. You're the one in the papers. The one that came back from the dead."

"That's me. What do you want?"

The man smiled. He stood up and put the guitar back in its case.

"Just wanna pay for my coffee, that's all." He looked over at Joan. "How much do I owe you, darlin'?"

"Seventy-five cents."

He slapped a handful of change on the counter. "Thanks much. See y'all soon." Tipping his hat to Castle, he stepped toward the door.

"Hey." Castle spoke without looking up.

The man turned.

"I didn't catch your name."

“That’s ‘cause I didn’t give it. But I’m flattered by your interest.” The man smiled, that same half smile he’d given before. “You liked that tune, huh? It’s called ‘The Day I Die.’ I wrote it for you, Frank.”

The two of them locked eyes again; at that second, Castle knew.

This guitar player, whatever his name was, *was* Saint’s man. And nothing was going to happen inside the diner.

They would meet again outside it, though. And there wouldn’t be any singing going on then, Castle was pretty sure about that.

The man pushed through the door and disappeared.

Joan, Bumpo, and Grayson all turned to him.

Castle turned back to his breakfast.

Joan kept trying to start a conversation. He didn’t mean to be rude, but he had to prepare. Besides, after the last week . . . she should know better. He wasn’t interested. He couldn’t be interested. He had to stay focused.

Maria. Will.

He left a big tip and exited the diner.

The lot was clear, save for the GTO. The street was empty, too, save for the usual assortment of neighborhood hangers-on. The blue-haired old ladies who couldn’t afford to move, the gray-haired men who’d lost their jobs, the kids with dreads who couldn’t give a damn whether they worked or not.

He climbed in the car and headed for the apartment. Saint’s man had dictated the time and place of their first meeting: Castle would pick their next. The loft was ready. He was ready. It was just a matter of luring the man there.

He checked the rearview. Clear. He turned onto Batavia, cut across the Waffle House lot over to local 211, and headed north. A roundabout route home, but it would give him time to think. Today was Sunday; Saint would want him out of the way by tomorrow afternoon, dinnertime at the latest, in order to be 100 percent certain he could proceed

with the week's shipment, even on the revised schedule he'd set up. Duka had clued him in on that schedule; Castle wondered if it might not be worth a call to the man now, see if he'd heard anything about this hit man with a guitar Saint had brought in.

Up ahead, the gate to the old Harbor Drawbridge came down. Castle slowed the GTO and stopped before the lowered arm.

All at once, a roar sounded behind him.

He looked in the rearview and saw a black-and-yellow Plymouth Roadrunner tearing down 211, heading right for him. Full speed.

The guitar player was behind the wheel.

Castle was reaching up, reaching for the first of the three levers he'd installed only yesterday, the one next to the driver's-side visor, when the Roadrunner slammed into the back of the GTO. His car shot forward, smashing through the lowered arm of the drawbridge gate and smack into the raised road surface itself.

If he hadn't had his arm up, Castle would have gone through the windshield.

As it was, the recoil almost snapped his neck anyway. He bounced back hard against the seat, shook his head to clear it—

And saw, in the driver's-side mirror, the guitar player climbing out of the Roadrunner, a sawed-off shotgun in each hand.

Castle reached up again; this time, he managed to grab the lever over his head and yank it down. He did the same with the one on either side of the car, and the spring-loaded steel panels he'd spent the last two weeks building slammed down around him, cutting off his view of the world outside and creating a bulletproof cage.

Just in time. Steel clanged on steel, and a small dent appeared in the driver's-side panel. A second later, another

huge clang sounded, and the windshield panel bowed inward.

In about two seconds, Castle knew, Saint's man would figure out all he had to do was shoot out the engine and wait.

Castle heard a rumble then: The drawbridge was lowering. That was his way out: He hit the gas and retracted the front panel at the exact same second. Caught a glimpse of the guitar player's surprised face as the GTO shot forward, and the man—just barely—managed to jump out of the way.

The bridge was far from horizontal yet, though: Castle had a split second to decide whether or not he would be able to make the jump to the other side; he realized he had no alternative and dropped the car into overdrive.

For a second, rubber squealed, and then, all at once, stopped.

He—and the GTO—were flying in midair.

Ahead of them, he caught a glimpse of the other half of the bridge lowering, and he willed the car to stay up long enough to come down on it.

They hit. The impact rattled his teeth—impact on the front end, not the rear. Castle felt the car begin to fall, and instinctually reached for the door handle.

The back end of the car hit then, rattling his teeth a second time—and the GTO straightened out, all four wheels down.

Castle shifted again, as the car smashed through the gate arm beginning to rise ahead of them, and flew back onto 211.

He saw the Roadrunner coming up fast behind him.

Keeping a hand on the wheel, he reached down, beneath the passenger seat, and drew one of his father's Parkers. He looked ahead. An intersection was coming up—De Valle, another big street.

Castle slowed the GTO—not enough to make Saint's man suspicious, but enough to let him get a little closer. Bring

him within range.

A hundred yards shy of the intersection, Castle threw the wheel hard left and slammed the brakes. The GTO slid toward De Valle, suddenly perpendicular to his pursuer.

Castle raised the shotgun and fired.

The Roadrunner swerved.

He pumped again and fired a second time. The other car's windshield shattered. Saint's man appeared from behind the wheel, pistol in hand, and fired.

The driver's-side mirror of the GTO shattered.

Castle hit the gas, and the GTO took off down De Valle.

He dropped the shotgun and drew his Colt. Waited.

The Roadrunner appeared behind him, again coming up fast. This time he didn't wait; he slammed on the brakes.

Saint's man was good, but no one could react that fast. The Roadrunner's tires screeched as it came within range.

Castle sighted down the barrel of the Colt and fired.

The passenger-side window shattered, but the Roadrunner's driver was unharmed. He raised his pistol, and Castle hit the gas again.

They were coming up on the old warehouse district. The other side of North Tampa. Castle realized he wasn't going to be able to make the apartment—too bad, he had some nice surprises waiting there—so he'd have to make do with what he had. Luckily, that included a few surprises as well.

Another intersection loomed. Castle shot through it, the Roadrunner just behind, and gaining. Castle had a feeling that all the damage the GTO had absorbed was taking its toll. The car felt sluggish to him.

The back windshield shattered: Castle heard the bullet slam into the back of the seat next to him. In the rearview, Saint's man smiled.

Up ahead, on his right, Castle saw an abandoned warehouse. Long abandoned: the brick facade was crumbling, vines were crawling up the building, the huge

front bay doors were half drawn, leaving the building open to the elements.

Looked like his kind of place.

Castle spun the wheel hard right, heading straight for it. The car bounced over the curb, heading for the space between the doors; and right at that second, Castle heard something snap just below his seat. Axle? Drive train? Brake line? Whatever it had been, all at once he had no control.

The side of the building loomed before him. He barely had time to put his hands up before his face before the GTO smashed into it.

The next thing he knew, his head was lolling on his shoulders. His ears were ringing.

Get out, he thought. Get out.

His hand found the door handle, and he pushed himself up and out of the seat, out his door.

He staggered once, and fell face first to the ground.

When he looked up, the Roadrunner was at the curb and Saint's man was walking toward him, holding a pistol in each hand, wearing a smile as big as Texas on his face.

Castle realized he was still holding the Colt. He raised it and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

Castle dropped that weapon and fumbled awkwardly under his coat.

His fingers closed on the handle of a knife, and, with the last of his strength, he drew it.

Saint's man burst out laughing.

"What is that, a potato peeler?"

Castle's vision blurred, then came back into focus. The man was right; the knife in his hand did look like a kitchen tool. Like a child's toy.

"You're dumber than a box of hammers, boy. You brought a knife to a gunfight."

"They paid you to kill me," Castle managed to say. "So kill me."

“It’ll be a pleasure.”

The man pressed the barrel of his gun against Castle’s head.

Castle squeezed the hidden button on the bottom of his knife.

The spring-loaded blade shot out and embedded itself in the guitar player’s throat.

“Akk,” the man said, looking down.

He gurgled once, then fell over backward and lay still.

Castle struggled to his feet. In the distance, sirens howled, growing closer.

He climbed into the Roadrunner and drove home.

THIRTY-THREE

Castle knew it would be only a matter of time before the police connected him to the GTO and the dead body. He didn't want Morris coming after him with a whole lot of questions. It would get in the way of his plans.

So he decided to be proactive.

He went in search of Jimmy Weeks.

He found his friend's Mustang right where he expected to: second-level assigned parking in the Federal Motor Pool Building.

An hour later, his friend came out of the garage's elevator and found him.

"Frank?" Weeks stopped in his tracks. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"You found me." Weeks smiled, that same nervous smile that had troubled Castle before. Probably still worried I'm going to do an intervention on him or something. Have no fear on that score, Jimmy. You can piss your whole life down the toilet if you want, gamble away every last thing you own. I won't raise a finger to interfere.

"So what's up?" Weeks asked.

"I want you to tell Morris something for me."

"Which would be . . ."

Castle filled him in, then, on the hit man and his car. Which, he told Weeks, was available on the top level of this very garage, should the police desire to come pick it up.

"I'll tell him," Weeks said. "But he still might come looking for you, Frank."

"He won't find me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I've come to a conclusion."

"Which is . . ."

Castle, who'd been sitting on the hood of the Mustang, jumped off it. Then he walked up to his old friend, looked him square in the eye, and lied through his teeth. "I'll never get over my grief by killing people."

"Ah." Weeks nodded. "If you've brought yourself to a place of closure . . . you're a wise man."

"If I want to find peace," Castle went on, "I'm not going to find it in Tampa. So I'm going."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"You can tell me."

"I'll send a postcard."

Weeks studied him a moment.

"Okay," he said finally. "If that's how it is—"

"That's how it is, Jimmy. I just don't want Morris following me all over the country."

"Understood. Well, I guess this is good-bye, Frank."

"That it is."

"But you will stay in touch?"

"You know it."

"All right then."

The two shook hands. At that second, Castle got the oddest feeling, almost as if his friend was happy to see him go.

He was almost going to say something when Weeks's eyes suddenly went wide.

"Shit. The task force meeting. If I'm late again . . ." He frowned. "You got the time, Frank?"

Castle looked down at his Rolex. "Almost seventeen hundred."

"Yeah. I gotta go," Weeks said, heading for his car. "You going somewhere? Let me give you a ride."

Castle started to say no, he was fine, when he suddenly got it. Weeks had asked him for the time.

Weeks's Rolex was gone.

Gone like the car and who knew what else, gone straight down the toilet to pay down his gambling debts. After Iraq, and Atlanta, after Gwen and Maria and all they'd shared . . .

"Frank? You want a ride or not?"

Castle snapped back to the here and now.

Fuck it, he thought. Not my concern. Not my problem. "Nah," he replied. "I'm gonna smoke some cigarettes."

"You don't smoke."

"I know." Castle walked off, smile stuck on his face as he took the stairs down a level, then used the pedestrian walkway above the street to cross Kennedy.

He couldn't stop thinking about Jimmy Weeks. Selling the Rolex . . .

Now a car was one thing. Weeks had loved that Porsche, but it was just a possession. The watch—Castle had sweated blood to buy that watch for his friend. Jimmy knew that, knew what that gift had meant. For Weeks to sell it was like a betrayal, as if—

All at once, Castle froze where he stood.

The world itself seemed to stop with him.

THIRTY-FOUR

John Saint could not believe this was happening.

Monday night, nine o'clock, Bucs/Patriots, and he was not in his seat. He was not even anywhere close to his seat, his third-row, fifty-yard-line, home-away-from-home seat, for what everyone agreed was not only going to be the best game of the season, early as it was, but was very likely a preview of Super Bowl XXXIX. Instead, his ass was bouncing up and down in an unmarked white delivery truck, along a barely lit stretch of coastal 679. On top of which, the fuckin' radio didn't even work, so he had no idea what the score was.

When his father had given him his marching orders this afternoon, John thought the old man was kidding.

"Pop, come on. You know what tonight is."

He'd looked around the breakfast table at Glass and then at his mom, both of whom avoided his eyes. That was when he knew his dad was not, in fact, kidding at all.

"I need you tonight, Johnny. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. I want someone on the shipment who I can trust not to fuck up."

John Saint was flattered to hear these words; sometimes he didn't know what his dad thought of him. He just would rather have not heard them this afternoon, that was all.

But what could he do? Fight with the old man? That wasn't his style. He never said a word against his father . . . well, not in public, at least. He wasn't an unappreciative little prick like Bobby had been.

The truck slowed. Carl, who was driving, gestured to his right.

"Up there, John. You see 'em?"

A second later, he did. Three ATVs pulled off to the side of the road. Carl pulled up on the shoulder in front of them.

"You wait here," Saint said, climbing out of the truck.

The guys in the ATVs were all illegals, mostly from Cuba, courtesy of the Toros. Older guys, with families, so they wouldn't be tempted to try anything funny. They spoke no English. Saint had a very limited Spanish vocabulary to draw on.

He walked around the back of the truck and opened it.

The illegals surged forward, and started taking the cash off the truck and loading it onto the ATVs. Saint walked among them, clapping his hands from time to time.

"Hey, let's go, let's go. *Rapido, mas rapido.*"

The men smiled at him as they hurried back and forth. John checked his watch: nine oh-eight. Okay. Finish loading here, drive to the boats . . . say nine-thirty. Load the boats, drive back . . . ten o'clock. Back downtown . . . eleven o'clock. The stadium . . . eleven-fifteen.

His face brightened. The fourth quarter was possible.

"*Mas rapido,*" he called out again. "*Mas rapido.*"

They *rapidoed* pretty well. By nine-thirty, they were indeed all down on the beach, and the first few bags were being loaded into the hold of boat number one. Saint watched for a moment, making sure the illegals were stacking neatly, and then went to the cockpit.

They had to have a radio up here, he thought. All boats have radios. Maybe it wasn't the right kind on which to pick up the game, but he would bet he could find somebody who could at least tell him the score.

He frowned at the instrument panel, which looked very confusing, and was wondering if any of the illegals knew how to work it when he heard a faint splash off the side of the boat.

They're throwing cash off the side, was his first thought. One bag overboard, no one would miss it right away; maybe they have somebody waiting for the boats to leave who wades into the water and picks it up. . . .

Then he saw that all the illegals were over by the ATVs, getting ready to make their second trip back to the boats.

Shark?

Something landed on the deck next to him then, with a loud thunk. A piece of metal. What . . .

Saint bent down and picked it up. The moon was bright enough that he could see writing on one side, and an arrow underneath that writing. Only it wasn't English writing; he couldn't make heads or tails of it, though the shapes were kind of familiar.

He frowned. Heads or tails, he thought, and turned the disk a hundred and eighty degrees.

Ah. Now he could read the writing: POINT TOWARD ENEMY. Saint blinked.

He dropped the mine and dove off the ship into the water. A second later, he heard an enormous roar behind him. Then another, and another, and another, so many he thought his eardrums would shatter.

He swam underwater until he thought his lungs would burst. Then he surfaced.

He was maybe fifty feet off shore. Both boats were burning. So were the ATVs. There were bodies on the beach, and one of the illegals was kneeling down in the sand, weeping softly.

A man was standing on a rise, just behind the fires. Even without the skull T-shirt, John Saint would have known him anywhere.

"Castle," he whispered.

It was almost as if the guy heard him. The man turned, and, at that instant, his face was lit up by the moonlight.

He looked straight in John Saint's eyes and smiled.

"All of it?" The color drained from Howard Saint's face. "Goddamn it, Quentin, all of it?"

Glass nodded reluctantly. "All of it, Howard."

Saint uttered something wordless, inarticulate, then turned and threw the brandy snifter in his hand against the mirrored wall. Both shattered.

Saint stood there a moment, in front of the mirror, breathing heavily, trying to compose himself. "Castle," he said through gritted teeth.

Glass lifted his hand off the mouthpiece of the receiver and spoke into it.

"Get back here as soon as you can," he told John, then hung up the phone.

Glass took a deep breath and tried to compose himself as well. This was not just bad news, it was catastrophically bad news. How they responded to it was as critical for him as it was for Saint: his fortunes rose and fell with Howard's, just as they had for the last thirty years.

At this particular moment, sad to say, those fortunes were about as low as they'd ever been.

It hadn't seemed that way minutes before: yes, Johnny Piscatelle's man from Memphis had failed miserably, but Castle was only one man, no matter how capable, and he was going up against an entire organization. Sooner or later (probably sooner, Glass guessed) they would kill him. And this time, they'd make sure he was dead.

But beyond that bit of bad news, the evening had been going very well. Chadwick had had dinner here with them, in Howard's private office, and the three of them had spent that time finalizing the list of invitees for the official campaign kickoff party next week.

For his own part, there hadn't been any further word from whoever it was who'd tried to extort money from him last Thursday. Glass wouldn't be surprised if his would-be blackmailer had gotten wind of his reputation and backed off. He hoped so. He'd thought for years about finding a way to break the ice with Howard regarding his sexual preferences, but the right moment had never presented itself. And this, most certainly, was not the right moment.

"Okay." Saint sat back down behind his desk. "We need to think this through, Quentin. I want you to get Epstein and Hegyes up here. They might have some ideas."

Glass nodded. "I'm on it."

"And make sure: No one—you hear me, *no one*—tells the Toros until we have a plan."

"I understand. I'll get Epstein first. He always—"

But Quentin never got to finish his sentence.

There was a commotion at the door to Saint's office. Lincoln and Cutter, who'd been guarding it, stepped sheepishly aside; a second later, Mike Toro, with brother Joe on his heels, entered the room.

One look at their faces, and Quentin knew that there was no need to tell them a thing about what had happened tonight. He could see Howard realized it, too.

The question was, What were the Toros going to do about it?

"Evening, Howard," Mike said. "Quentin."

Saint stood up behind his desk. "Mike. Joe. What can I do for you?"

"That's a good one," Mike said. "Isn't it, Joe?"

"Oh, yeah. What he can do for us. That's very good."

Glass saw his boss flush. Saint took a deep breath and, for the second time in as many minutes, visibly forced himself to relax.

"We had chicken Havana tonight," Mike said. "Very tasty."

He began circling the room in one direction as he talked. Joe circled it in the other.

"We were going to invite you for our feast," Joe said. "But then we decided . . . nah."

"It's all right. We ate," Saint said.

Mike stopped right in front of the desk. He picked up a clear yellow rock from the desk's surface and held it up to the light.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It's amber," Howard Saint replied. "Fossilized tree sap."

"Fossilized tree sap?" Joe asked. "No shit?"

"That's right."

“Looks like a yellow rock to me, Mike,” Joe said. “But what do I know?”

“Don’t feel bad, Joe. I didn’t know what it was either.

Amber.” Mike shrugged, and put the rock down. Next to it was a dark wooden box. Toro hefted the box and smiled. “But this. Now this, I know what it is.”

So did Glass. It was a cigar humidor. Howard Saint’s personal cigar humidor. You did not lay hands on it without his express permission, and you certainly didn’t dream of opening it.

As Mike Toro was this second doing.

“Don’t touch the Cubans, Mike,” Howard said.

Toro ignored him and pulled out a cigar. He clipped the end and lit it.

Then he frowned.

“It’s not a Cuban, Howard. It’s Honduran. Me—I’m a Cuban.”

Mike blew a big puff across the desk. Again, Saint visibly controlled himself.

“Have you heard the news?” Mike asked. “I’ll bet you have.”

“A shipment of cash was torched on Mullet Key,” Joe supplied. “Whose money was it?”

Glass had to give his boss credit; Saint didn’t blink an eye. He regarded the two Cubans impassively.

“Our money,” Joe said into the silence, answering his own question. “It was our money, Howard.”

“Our mother always put her cash in the mattress,” Mike said, “which I thought was a good idea until the house burned down. It was a big fire. She lost everything. That’s what happens when you don’t watch your money. You lose everything, Howard. Everything.”

Mike and his boss locked eyes.

Saint leaned forward on his desk, till his face was inches away from Mike’s and Joe’s. Then he spoke. “Is that a threat?”

"Just a recitation of the facts, Howard. The facts that happened to us this very evening," Joe said.

"Fourteen out of fifteen shipments are perfect. One goes bad, and you give me this? And because you're, what—mad at me? You want to scare me?" Saint asked.

Mike puffed on the Honduran again.

"Thirteen out of fifteen," he said. "Don't forget the weather last week. The sudden hundred-dollar-bill shower."

"Two shipments gone bad, Howard," Joe said. "Two times fifty million. That's what—a hundred million, Mike?"

"A hundred million, Joe. That's exactly right. A hundred million fucking dollars we're out."

"You can't get insurance for what we do," Howard said. "So I'm not going to cover your fucking losses, and if you don't like that, remember one thing, Mike. I've got more guns."

Mike Toro took another puff on his cigar. "So that's how it is, Howard?"

"That's how it is."

"All right." Toro pressed the lit end of his cigar into Saint's desk. The wood began to smoke.

"Chicken Havana," Mike said, dropping the cigar.

Without another word, the Toros left.

Glass shook his head.

"They're animals," he said.

"Without a doubt. Look at this. That's solid cherry. How do you fix something like that?" Saint pointed at the mark on his desk.

"With all due respect, Howard," Quentin began, "we don't have more guns. It's my duty to point out to you—"

But his boss's temper, which he'd held in check so well these past few minutes, suddenly exploded. "It's your duty to make Castle dead. Whatever it costs, whatever it takes. Call the Russian."

Glass frowned. "He's in Colombia, Howard. I told you that. He—"

“CALL THE FUCKING RUSSIAN!” Howard Saint screamed. He glared at Quentin then the way he always glared at Lincoln and Cutter. Like a hired hand. Like someone disposable.

Glass frowned. He didn't know why, but Howard seemed very angry with him these last couple days.

“I'll call the Russian,” he said, and left the room.

THIRTY-FIVE

Castle did not want to write in his journal.

The white space would tempt him; he would leap beyond facts and schedules and plans, and would begin writing down his thoughts and his feelings, the way he'd done before, when Maria was still alive. And writing those feelings down would not expunge them; it would strengthen them; and thus dissipate his focus. Today, more than ever, he needed to be focused.

Today, at last, was Thursday.

He was in his apartment, stripped to the waist. He'd been up most of the night again, finalizing his movements in the hours to come. A second check of Howard Saint's phone records had confirmed his suspicions: the number was there, in black and white, on more than several occasions. Dating back to the time period in question. Back to Puerto Rico.

As always, his eyes went to the picture on the desk. Maria and Will. Then he picked up another picture lying next to that one, a wallet-size snapshot he'd unearthed only yesterday from the bottom of the footlocker. It was a picture of himself and Maria, with Jimmy Weeks squeezed between them, all three mugging for the camera.

Atlantic City. His first and only trip there. When he'd come across the little photo, his first thought was: Where's Gwen? She'd been there, too—the whole trip, in fact, had been her idea. Then he remembered: They'd had to take turns inside the little photo booth, it was too small for all of them to fit in at once. Gwen was in some of the other shots: he could picture one of her and Jimmy, one of her and Maria. He thought about those other photos and wondered what had become of them.

He thought about Jimmy and Gwen, and then about Weeks and himself, and he wondered what had become of them,

too.

Floorboards creaked out in the hall. He set down the picture, picked a clip up off the table, and slammed it home inside his .45.

If Howard Saint—or another one of his lackeys—had come calling, they'd find him prepared.

There was a knock at the door. Castle peered through the peephole. Not Saint at all. It was Grayson. Wide-eyed, frantic.

Castle opened the door.

"Mr. Castle . . . you have to come . . . it's that guy after Joan. He's in her apartment!"

Castle slid the gun into his waistband, grabbed his shirt from the chair, and strode out into the hall.

He'd warned the junkie what would happen if he showed up again, though he didn't want to follow through on that threat to the letter. Not today. He couldn't afford to draw any kind of attention today.

But that didn't mean he couldn't give the junkie an ass kicking he'd remember for a long, long time.

Joan's door was open. He pushed right on through—

And stopped dead in his tracks.

There was no junkie.

There was a table full to overflowing with food; standing next to it, a nervous-looking Joan and a smiling Stanley Bumpo.

"We want you to have dinner with us," Joan said.

Castle couldn't believe it. Have dinner? He had no time for dinner.

Today was Thursday.

Bumpo must have seen the look on his face.

"Please," the man said. "I've been cooking all day."

Castle looked at the table.

Ribs. Fried chicken. Collard greens. Hush puppies. French fries. Sweet potato fries. Baked beans. Dinner rolls. Corn muffins.

His stomach growled. "That's a lot of food," he said.

Bumpo smiled. Joan smiled.

Castle smiled, too.

"How about a beer?" Grayson asked.

Halfway through the meal, he left them.

Joan saw it happen. He hadn't said much once they began eating, one-word answers, as usual, to her questions, to Dave's and Bumpo's questions, but he was listening to the rest of them talk at least, nodding his head or smiling in acknowledgment to what they had to say. Right up until a minute ago, when he'd suddenly set down his fork, as if he'd thought of something, cocked his head, and stared across the table at nothing.

Stanley, sitting across from him, was too busy eating to notice. Dave did—he exchanged a glance with Joan, then shrugged, a what-are-ya-gonna-do kind of shrug—after which he went right back to eating himself.

Thing was, Joan didn't know what she was going to do. The whole point of this meal was for them to get to know Castle—Frank, okay, she felt as if she could think of him as Frank now—and for him to get to know them. Her, specifically.

She was, she suddenly realized, wasting her time. Making a fool of herself. He wasn't interested. Period.

Normally, with guys, she didn't have that kind of problem. She was no Britney Spears, but she was pretty, and she knew how to work what she had. She'd thought about trying a little of that with Castle—put on stockings, heels, a little more makeup, a tighter shirt . . .

But she didn't want him that way. Or, at least, *only* that way. On top of which, she had a feeling that approach wouldn't work with him. It would blow what little selfconfidence she had right out of the water. No, thanks.

So what could she do? She couldn't force him to like her. She couldn't force him to talk. Accept it, and move on. Enjoy the dinner for what it was—Stanley had made a feast, and

they were all here together, and that was something. That was a helluva lot better than she'd had it for a long, long time. And Castle was part of it—maybe not the way she wanted, but he'd gotten rid of skanky Mike for her, hadn't he?

She looked around the table, at him and Dave and Stanley, plenty of reasons to be cheerful, and set down her fork.

"I know it's not Thanksgiving, but I'd like each of us to say what we're thankful for."

Stanley looked up and smiled at her. He was the only one, though. Dave kept eating. Castle—Frank, dammit, Frank—was still off in his own little world.

She kept talking anyway.

"I'm thankful to be alive this year, and to have a job. And to be sober."

"Yeah." Dave stopped eating and nodded. "I'm thankful for . . . this girl who gave me her number."

Joan raised an eyebrow. She hadn't heard about this.

"Cut it out," Stanley said. "When did a girl give you her number?"

"On one of those bulletin boards. She seems very nice," Dave said, a little defensively. "So I'm thankful for that. I'm thankful that my mom got out of jail. I'm thankful that I'm alive."

Stanley stopped chewing.

"What am I thankful for? I'm thankful for a lot. Thanks for letting me lose ten pounds. Thanks, Joan. Thanks for Diet Pepsi. Thanks for all of you."

"Here, here." Joan raised her beer, and she and Dave clinked bottles. Stanley raised his soda can and banged it against the beers, and then they all turned to Castle.

He was back with them, Joan saw. He'd been listening, if not to her and Dave, then definitely to Stanley.

He cleared his throat. "Thanks," he said, getting to his feet. "Thanks for dinner. Now, though . . . I have to be

going.”

“Oh, no.” Stanley rose, too. “You can’t go yet. Not before the pièce de résistance! Iced Florentine.”

Frank frowned. “Iced Florentine?”

“Dessert. We’ll be right back. Come on, Dave.”

Dave took another hit off his beer.

“Come on, Dave,” Stanley repeated.

Joan watched Stanley drag his friend from the room, and she suddenly realized the two of them were trying to play matchmaker. Oh, God. Had she been that obvious about her interest? How embarrassing.

She looked up at Castle and was surprised to see him smiling.

“Iced Florentine.” He shrugged and sat back down. “Whatever it is, it sounds good.”

“I’m sure it will be. Stanley likes to cook almost as much as he likes to eat.”

“This . . .” Castle shook his head. “This is the best meal I’ve had in a long, long time. Thanks again for inviting me.”

“Not at all. Thank you . . . for getting rid of my . . . problem the other night.” Their eyes met. Joan was suddenly aware she was smiling, too.

“Frank. I—”

She stopped talking. The second she’d said his name, it was as if a curtain had been drawn across his face, obscuring any trace of the man himself. The smile disappeared from his face and his eyes, to be replaced by the same hard glint he’d worn every other time they’d spoken.

“What’s wrong?”

He got to his feet again. “I have to go.”

She saw the gun, then, poking out from his waistband. And all at once, she was angry. Fine that he didn’t want her, but—

“Say you kill them all. Then what?”

He shook his head and went to the window.

She followed.

“Will your memories go away?”

“My memories,” he said, his voice suddenly thick, “will never go away.”

She took a deep breath then, and put a hand on his arm.

“You can create new memories, Frank. Good ones. Good memories can save your life.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he turned and looked down at her hand on his arm. “I’m not what you’re looking for,” he said softly, and pulled away.

A moment later, she heard the door to his apartment open, and then gently swing shut.

Castle set the photo of Maria and Will back down on his desk.

It was animal instinct. Strictly a function of how long he’d gone without sex. Months. That was not natural. The woman was attractive enough, but that was as far as it went. Maria had been his soul mate; this woman had been a junkie. Maria had made him laugh, made him think; this woman’s conversation had foundered after a single dinner. He had nothing in common with her, save the address they shared, and after tonight, they would not have even that. He should not have gotten involved with her and her ex-boyfriend in the first place, and he should never have agreed to the dinner tonight. And he could not afford to waste his time thinking about Joan any longer. He needed to focus.

It was Thursday.

Someone knocked on the door.

Castle rose to his feet, angry, and yanked it open.

“Look,” he began. “I told you—”

A fist the size of a football smacked him in the jaw.

Castle fell back, stunned, as the Russian entered his apartment.

THIRTY-SIX

The Russian. Ivan Vassilovitch Dragovsky. Castle knew him right away, knew of him from the bureau's files and from reports he'd heard, back in Bosnia, back in his Delta Force days, about a Russian soldier who had narrowly missed achieving on his own what the half-dozen men in Frank's squad hadn't even come close to doing, capturing Radovan Karadzic. He'd killed a dozen of Karadzic's bodyguards in the process, and the only reason Radovan escaped was because he'd had a helicopter and the Russian hadn't.

Castle dismissed the tale as a crock. His own ego, and a lack of proof, as this "Russian" had supposedly deserted right after the Karadzic incident and gone into a more lucrative line of work.

Castle had all but forgotten about the man when, a half-dozen years later, while he was Otto Krieg, Yuri Astrov had asked him to find this legendary Russian, to look into the possibility of hiring him as a bodyguard. Castle had been certain he'd come up empty and would have to report back to Astrov that this Russian was only a myth.

But the myth turned out to be true.

He'd gotten the word back from one of Astrov's contacts in South America: There was indeed a Russian who was working for the Escobar cartel in Colombia. A day later, Castle had had the man's file in his hand.

It contained Dragovsky's name. His war record. His size—seven feet, five inches, 450 pounds—which Castle had been going to dismiss as an obvious error, until he found the sheaf of pictures attached to the back of the report.

Seven-five seemed like it might be a little shy of the truth. Dragovsky was the biggest man he'd ever seen in his life; one of the photos in the stack was of Ivan and his army unit.

The man towered over the other soldiers like an NBA player on a girls' field hockey team.

He'd been unable to hire him for Astrov, though: Escobar had Ivan on a permanent retainer, and though he would consider renting him out for specific missions, it would cost an arm and a leg to do so.

Howard Saint, clearly, was willing to pay that cost.

Those thoughts all passed through Castle's mind in a split second.

And then the Russian hit him again.

Wham, with the right hand.

Wham, with the left, just as hard.

Castle staggered.

Ivan was ambidextrous. That had been in the file, too.

The Russian reared back and swung again. This time, Castle had the wherewithal to duck.

The man's fist went through the wall—and stuck.

Castle grabbed the knife from his boot and, in a single, fluid motion, jabbed the blade into the Russian's kidney.

Except that somehow, miraculously, the Russian grabbed his wrist with his free hand and stopped Castle's thrust just as it tore his shirt.

That's not possible, Castle thought. No one that big can move that fast.

The Russian then pulled his stuck hand free of the wall, wrenched the knife from Castle's grasp with his other hand, and stabbed Frank straight through the shoulder.

Castle screamed in agony.

The Russian smiled, pulled the knife out, and thrust forward again.

Somehow, Castle was able to dodge. The knife stuck in the wall. Ivan struggled to pull it free.

Castle staggered deeper into the loft.

Joan stood by herself a moment, in the empty apartment, letting a little wave of self-pity wash over her.

Then she went to join her friends.

Stanley's door was open; she walked in and found him wearing a chef's hat, stirring something on the stove. Dave was kneeling next to the stereo, flipping through a stack of records.

Both looked up at her entrance.

"What happened to dessert?" she asked.

"What happened to Castle?" Dave shot back.

She waved a hand dismissively.

Stanley nodded sadly and opened his refrigerator. He pulled out a tub of ice cream, and handed it—and a spoon—to Joan.

She took both to the couch. Dave put on a record and began air-conducting the music.

All at once, a huge thump shook the building.

"He's at it again," Stanley said. "All he ever does is work."

Joan stabbed at the ice cream, lifted a frozen hunk the size of a softball from the container.

"It's what he loves," she said, and took a bite.

Castle hid behind the bathroom door and waited. He'd been very, very careless, and now he would have to be very, very careful. This could not be a fair fight—he'd die in a heartbeat. An ambush was his only chance.

And Castle had been preparing for an ambush—preparing himself and the apartment—for weeks now.

Castle clutched the crowbar in his hand as the Russian's footsteps grew closer, then stopped.

Castle risked a peek out from behind the door.

Ivan stood in the middle of the room, flexing his hands, weight on the balls of his feet, rocking gently from side to side. Listening. Eyes scanning the room, alert for—

The Russian turned and smiled right at Frank's hiding place.

Castle saw the mirror directly opposite him, realized he'd been spotted, and charged, crowbar raised high above his head.

He'd been afraid the shoulder wound would slow him down; it didn't. His leap from hiding was perfectly timed; his swing was straight and true and backed with every ounce of strength he could summon.

The crowbar slammed down, full force, on the Russian's head. It made a horrible sound.

Ivan smiled.

"Ah . . . Baseball! I like baseball."

He ripped the crowbar from Castle's hands and, before Frank could move, swung it hard into his chest.

Castle felt a rib crack, and gasped. The Russian swung again and broke another one. A third swing, and then a fourth, and a fifth, and Castle staggered backward into the bathroom.

Holding the crowbar with his hands, like a baseball player heading toward the plate from the on-deck circle, the Russian followed.

Castle slid open the drawer of the vanity and smiled.

It pays to plan ahead, he thought, and he pulled out the grenade he'd hidden there.

He looked up.

The Russian stood in the doorway, a sudden frown crossing his face.

Castle pulled the pin and threw the grenade. At the same instant, he reached for the lever he'd installed next to the vanity and pulled that as well. The spring-loaded steel door above the bathroom entrance began to descend.

The Russian batted the grenade back into the bathroom.

The steel door slammed down.

The grenade exploded.

The needle on the record player skipped. The turntable arm lifted, and the machine shut off.

"Did you feel that?" Stanley stood at the stove, poised to begin making the Florentine.

Dave frowned.

"You think something's wrong?" he asked.

On the couch, Joan took another bite of ice cream. "I didn't feel a thing," she said.

Stanley looked at her and shrugged. He continued cooking.

Dave turned the music back on.

Plaster sprinkled down on him. Castle looked up from inside the cast-iron tub that had saved his life and saw the Russian looming over him.

"Castle," he said, and grabbed both of Frank's legs. Ivan picked him up then, swung him through the air once, and let go.

Castle went through what was left of a wall and landed in the bedroom.

He lay on the floor a moment, stunned.

"Castle. Message." He heard the Russian's voice, and then heard wood splinter. He struggled to his feet.

The Russian was holding his toilet. His entire toilet.

Castle charged at him. Ivan used the toilet the way he'd used the crowbar, like a baseball bat.

He hit Castle with it and sent him flying again. Castle slammed back into something very hard. His head spun. The refrigerator. He was in the kitchen.

The Russian's face was suddenly inches from his.

"Message from Howard Saint," Ivan said. "Message is: Die."

All at once, the Russian's hands were around his throat. Tightening. Castle couldn't breathe.

His eyes scanned the kitchen, searching for the weapons he'd hidden. No grenades here; the gun emplacements out of reach, the knives in a drawer all the way on the other side of the room.

Out the window, he could see into Bumpo's apartment. Stanley stood at the stove, cooking, his back to Castle. Dave conducted an orchestra. Joan sat on the couch, eating and staring off into space.

Castle gasped for air, tried to dislodge the Russian's hands.

Ivan slammed his head back against the refrigerator again.

"How do you say in America: Just chill." He smiled, and repeated the word and the action. "Chill. Chill. Chill."

From somewhere, Castle found the strength to kick him in the knee. The Russian grimaced, then tried to step back, his hands still wrapped around Castle's neck. The move took Frank out from in front of the refrigerator . . . and put him in range of the hidden gun emplacement.

Castle punched a button on the wall, and the revolver shot out from its hiding spot. Castle grabbed it and turned to fire. The Russian, however, scooped a barbell off the floor and smashed it into the gun.

Castle looked down at his weapon. The barrel was oval.

Ivan hit him with the barbell, and Castle flew backward, out through his still-open door and into the hall.

The Russian followed.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Dave had always taken grief about his taste in music.

Growing up, while his friends were into Nirvana and Soundgarden, he was listening to big band stuff: Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, the Dorsey brothers—his grandfather had gotten him hooked the year he was six and had to stay with them while his mom detoxed. After that, he just couldn't listen to anything recorded past 1950. Okay, some Blue Note stuff, but otherwise . . .

Bill Haley was the Antichrist, as far as he was concerned.

It wasn't a big deal until puberty, when every girl in the eighth grade was dying to talk about the latest, greatest records, and Dave was revealed (not for the last time in his life) as a clueless geek.

He had suddenly become cool for about a month in high school when swing was briefly in, but, soon enough, everyone was mocking him again. It got even worse his senior year when he discovered classical, because then the music teachers all wanted to play him stuff, which earned him a teacher's pet rep and several bruises. By the time college rolled around, he'd bought an expensive pair of headphones and learned to keep his taste—and his CD collection—to himself.

Which was why Bumpo's record collection had come as such a pleasant surprise. The day he'd moved in, he'd heard Wagner coming from underneath his new neighbor's door, and he'd beaten on it till Stanley answered. When Stanley showed Dave the record collection his mother had bequeathed him . . . well, he'd felt as if he'd died and gone to heaven. There were 78s of Caruso; the original Decca Callas collection, the actual vinyl, which to his ears sounded so much better than the CDs burned from those original recordings; Olander conducting Beethoven's ninth. . . .

And Verdi. The complete Verdi. *Rigoletto*.

Dave closed his eyes and tuned out the slamming from Castle's apartment, letting the music flood over him.

Wham. Wham. Wham.

He frowned, and opened his eyes.

Joan and Bumpo were dishing out the Florentine by the stove. Had been, anyway. Stanley was stopped in midmotion, scooping a ladle full of the fried ice-cream treat from the vat. Next to him, holding a bowl, Joan was frowning, too.

"Is it my imagination," she asked. "Or is it louder than usual tonight?"

"Your imagination, I think," Dave said.

"It's definitely louder, Dave." Stanley cocked his head a moment and listened. "It sounds like it's coming from right out in the hall."

Don't be silly, Dave was about to say, when an ax split Bumpo's door in half.

Joan screamed.

The door splintered, and Castle fell through what remained of it, followed a second later by the biggest guy Dave had ever seen in his life, holding the ax at his side.

"Run!" Castle shouted. He looked the way skanky Mike had looked the other night—worse, in fact. Much worse. More black and blue than not.

The big guy raised the ax and brought it down again. At the last possible second, Castle rolled out of the way, and the blade buried itself in the floor.

Holy shit, Dave realized. He really is trying to kill him.

The big guy dropped the ax, picked Castle up by the shirt, and spun him around and around like an airplane. Joan and Bumpo dodged frantically out of the way: The guy slammed Castle down on Bumpo's cutting table, right next to the stove.

He reached for Bumpo's knives.

Castle grabbed the vat of oil off the burner and threw it in the big guy's face.

The man screamed and staggered, clawing at his face.

Castle got to his feet and tackled him, driving him back out into the hallway.

“Run!” he called out again, over his shoulder, and then disappeared through the door.

Joan looked at Dave. Bumpo looked at Dave.

“Shit,” Dave said. “Let’s go help him.”

They ran out into the hallway. The two men were on the ground, rolling over and over, locked in each other’s embrace, the big guy punching blindly, Castle striking back with relentless purpose.

Dave didn’t know what to do. A second later, there was nothing he could do.

They hit the top of the stairs, still fighting, still wrapped together, completely unaware of where they were, what was about to happen. The big guy swung, a roundhouse punch that caught nothing but air, and then—just like that—they were falling.

Clunk, clunk, clunk was the noise they made, a slamming, bone-on-wood noise that made Dave’s stomach turn.

“Frank!” Joan yelled, and she ran to the staircase, Dave a step behind her.

He heard them hit bottom, and cringed. Next to him, at the top of the stairs, Joan cringed, too.

Bumpo came up behind them.

Dave shook his head. “Whoa,” he said.

“Mr. Castle?” Stanley called out. “Frank?”

There was no response.

The three of them took a hesitant step forward, then looked down the staircase together.

Dave heaved a sigh of relief; Castle pushed up off the ground and got to his feet.

“You’re all right?” Joan said.

“I’m fine,” Castle replied. “He’s not.”

Which was most definitely true: The big guy was lying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, his unseeing eyes wide

open.

Something about his position suddenly struck Dave as off. It took him a few seconds to figure out what, though, and when he did get it, he wished he'd hadn't, because the realization made his stomach roll over.

The big guy's head had been completely twisted around on his neck. One hundred eighty degrees.

He thought he was going to be sick.

Then he got a better look at Castle, who had just finished climbing the stairs, and threw up.

Careless. Stupid and careless, and it was going to cost him everything.

Today was Thursday. Six P.M., at a rough guess. In less than two hours, Livia Saint was going to be walking out of the spa, dressed in her workout clothes, putting her gym bag in the Jaguar, and then heading over to the Centurion. He had to be there. Had to.

But his head wouldn't stop spinning.

He staggered down the hall and into his apartment. The others followed.

"You're bleeding," Joan said, looking down at the floor.

Castle looked, too. Blood was pooling at his feet. A lot of blood.

His vision blurred; the next thing he knew, he was on his knees.

Joan's face appeared next to his.

"Frank. We've got to get you to a hospital."

"No. No hospital. No police."

"You need a doctor."

Castle shook his head. What he needed was time, just a minute or two to gather his strength, to push the pain away long enough to complete the task before him. . . .

"I know what he wants," Dave said, and disappeared. A second later, the man was back, holding out a bottle of Jack Daniel's.

“Good,” Castle managed, taking the bottle from him. He slugged it down like Gatorade. It burned in his throat; it burned in his gut; it burned in his veins.

“We’ve got to do something about that knife wound,” Joan said.

It was her turn to disappear then. She returned with Castle’s first-aid kit: she cut away the shirt from the wound, and then began threading a surgical needle.

“Gee,” Dave said. “You know what you’re doing.”

“Waitress, cook, nurse,” Bumpo added.

She smiled. “I’m not good with much, but I’m good with a needle.”

She took out the iodine and poured it on his wound. It stung like a maddened swarm of bees. Castle took another hit of the whiskey.

She held up the needle.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“This’ll hurt.”

“It always does.” Castle had been treated on the battlefield before; he could handle it.

Then the needle pierced his skin, and he screamed.

“Is he going to die?” Dave asked. “He looks weak.”

Joan glanced up quickly from the wound: Frank’s eyes had rolled back in his head. His eyelids were fluttering.

Castle didn’t look good, Dave was right about that, but she doubted he was going to die. The wound didn’t seem that bad: On the other hand, what the hell did she know? She’d been an ER nurse for all of six months before getting fired for stealing from the hospital pharmacy. Most of those brain cells, her nurse-trained brain cells, had been killed off long ago by her drinking. She was going by instinct here as much as training.

“I think he’s going to be fine,” she said, doing another stitch.

“Yes. I agree . . . Joan . . . appearances . . . aren’t . . . everything.” All at once, Dave’s voice sounded strained: She looked up and saw Frank had grabbed him by the bicep and was holding on tight.

“Ah, Mr. Castle,” Dave said, “you can let go now. Please?”

Frank’s grip relaxed.

Joan patted his shoulder. “Just about done here. Two more stitches, I think, and then—”

Engines roared outside. Tires squealed, and doors slammed.

“Sounds like a couple BMWs.” Dave frowned. “Who owns BMWs around here?”

“That’s an easy one,” Joan said. “Nobody.”

“Right.” Dave sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

Castle reached up then, and tugged her arm. He mumbled something.

“Say that again,” she said, bending closer.

At that same instant, Stanley walked to the window and frowned.

“Uh-oh.” He turned back to the others. “Does everyone with guns in Tampa have this address?”

“No, really—I do hope he’s still alive, Quentin, and I’ll tell you why.” John Saint slammed the door behind him, and started up the front steps of Castle’s building. “Because I want a chance to inflict some pain on him myself. A little payback, for what he’s done. A lot of payback, actually, before he goes off to never-never land.”

“I wouldn’t worry about Castle getting off easy, John,” Glass said, climbing a step behind the younger Saint. “The Russian specializes in pain. Wait.”

They’d reached the top of the stoop. Glass had stopped Saint with an outstretched arm, a foot shy of the building’s front door.

“What?” Saint frowned. “He could be dyin’ in there already, Castle. Let’s get to him.”

Quentin shook his head. "Better safe than sorry." He was thinking not just about Castle but about Howard and Livia, both of whom had warned him about keeping John Saint safe.

Glass motioned Lincoln and Cutter forward. He and Saint stepped aside as the two men took up positions on either side of the front door.

"On three," Cutter said. "One . . . two . . ."

They kicked the door wide open.

"Fuck!" Glass screamed at the top of his lungs.

The Russian's body lay at the bottom of the staircase, burned, battered, and very, very broken.

"Looks like you got your wish, John," Glass said, unholstering his gun and popping in a fresh clip.

The others did the same, and then they started up the stairs.

"We have to move him," Dave said.

No shit, Joan thought. The only thing was, Frank was not in any condition to be moved more than a few feet.

"Where?" Stanley asked. "There's no place to go."

Castle mumbled something again. Louder this time.

" 'See you later'?" Joan asked, frowning. "Did you just say 'See you later'?"

He shook his head weakly, and tried again.

"What?" Dave asked. "What did he say?"

" 'Ebidador,' " Stanley said. "I distinctly heard 'ebidador.' "

"What's an ebidador?" Joan said. A name? A place? A kind of weapon?

"Mr. Castle," Stanley said, leaning over him. "Could you repeat that?"

But he couldn't. Frank was fading, Joan saw, eyes rolling back in his head, babbling, incoherent from the pain, probably going into shock.

"Ebideebeebobby," Castle gurgled, head lolling on his neck. "Ebideebeebader."

"My apartment," Joan said. "It's the closest."

She took one arm. Stanley took the other. They began dragging him toward the door.

“Wait!” Dave shouted, pointing down at the floor. “Elevator. See?”

Joan didn’t.

“Elevator!” Dave yelled again, running over and grabbing one of Castle’s legs. “Come on! Help!”

He spun the man around a 180 degrees and began dragging him away from the door.

Joan resisted for a second. Then she took a closer look at the floor where Dave had pointed, and nodded.

“Ah. Elevator,” she said, and began pulling in the same direction.

THIRTY-EIGHT

The Russian had given it his all, that was obvious. The building looked as if someone had come through with a wrecking ball, intent on causing as much damage as possible. The hall was trashed, the apartment they'd just come from was trashed, and there was blood everywhere.

"Hey, Mr. Glass." Cutter pointed to the floor. More blood. A trail. Leading down the hall toward the one apartment they hadn't checked yet.

Glass motioned for Cutter and John to back off. He took the point with Lincoln this time.

"On three," he said, ready to kick the door down, but didn't even bother to start the count. Once he took a closer look, he saw that it was open already.

Glass tapped it with his foot, and it swung wide.

This was definitely Castle's apartment; he knew that right away. It was in even worse shape than the others—looked like a freaking tornado had hit here, never mind a wrecking ball.

"Give it up, Castle!" he shouted into the wreckage.

No answer. Not that he'd expected one; just because he was outnumbered, Castle was going to surrender? Not a chance in hell. He was going to keep coming after them until they were all dead, or he was. That was the only way this could end.

There was a lot more blood on the floor in here, Glass saw. He wondered if maybe the Russian hadn't gotten to him after all, if maybe Castle hadn't crawled back into his hole and died here.

He had a funny feeling they weren't going to be that lucky, though.

"All right." He motioned the others forward. "Let's take it nice and slow. Shoot anything that moves, even if it's just a rat."

They moved into the apartment then, he and Lincoln first, John and Cutter a half-dozen steps behind.

No one in this room. They moved on to the next one.

Two guys—a fat one, and a geek with a ring through his nose—were sitting on a couch, looking up at Glass and the others as if this sort of thing happened to them every day.

“What the fuck . . .” Glass frowned. “Who are you?”

“Hi.” The fat one smiled. “I’m Stanley.”

“Dave. What’s going on?”

Glass looked at the geek and shook his head.

“What’s going on? Unbelievable. Lincoln,” he motioned the man closer, “you and Cutter check the other rooms. You see anything suspicious, do not touch it. Call me. Understood?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Glass. Understood.”

They left. John stepped up alongside Quentin.

“Who are these clowns?”

“Who gives a shit?” Glass raised his gun again and leveled it at the fat man. “Where is Castle?”

The fat man blinked. “Castle?”

“That’s right. Frank Castle. Who lives here?”

“Uh . . .”

Glass put the gun right up against Stanley’s forehead. “I asked you a question, fat man.”

“Maybe this fat fuck ate him,” John said, poking the man in the belly with his gun. “That what happened, buddy? You get hungry, eat the guy we’re lookin’ for, huh?”

“Hey. Leave him alone.” The geek stepped forward. “He doesn’t know anything.”

“Oh? Is that right? He doesn’t know anything?” John asked.

“Yeah. Yeah. That’s right.”

“Okay,” Glass said, swinging the gun so that it pointed at the geek’s chest. “Then I’ll ask you. Where is Castle?”

The geek swallowed. “Uh . . . he’s . . . not here. Definitely not here.”

“Really?” Glass pulled back the trigger of the gun ever so slightly. The hammer clicked. “Are you sure about that?”

“Oh. Well. I don’t . . . actually . . . I mean . . .” The geek was shaking his head, eyes wide, just staring at the gun, and Glass knew he was going to crack in one more second. At that point they’d have Castle, and he, Quentin Glass, would be the one to kill him, lay his dead body in front of Howard Saint so that whatever bug had crawled up his boss’s ass these past few days would go away, and the two of them would go back to how it was.

Oh, yeah. He’d kill the fat man and the geek, too. Or maybe let John do them, so the kid wouldn’t be too pissed when Quentin did Castle.

That was how it was going to go; Glass could see the whole wonderful course of events laid out before him.

And then the geek stopped shaking, set his jaw, and announced: “I’m not saying shit.”

“What?”

“I’m not saying shit.”

Glass glared. “We don’t want shit. We want answers.”

Lincoln and Cutter returned then, shaking their heads. No Castle. This was unacceptable: The Russian dead, Castle gone without a trace . . .

Glass looked around the room then, and his eyes fell on a long metal table against the wall, tools scattered across the top of it.

He turned back to the geek and smiled.

“Tie this fuck up,” he said, his eyes never leaving the geek’s face. “We’ll see what he does and doesn’t know.”

Joan couldn’t watch.

And yet she couldn’t look away.

Crammed into the little freight elevator next to a now-unconscious Castle, she had no choice but to look up through the floorboards at the scene unfolding above her.

She hadn’t even known about the little elevator, though in retrospect it made sense the building would have one, some

way of hauling freight up from the garage into whatever sort of business the loft had once held.

Whatever the business had been, it couldn't have used much equipment. The cage was tiny: squeezing the two of them in had been the hardest part of the process, had made the effort they'd gone to prying open the recessed metal doors in the floor and hauling the old, rusty elevator cage up seem like child's play.

Now Joan was staring at the crazy man with the goatee and wishing they'd all tried to squeeze in.

He scared her even more than that Goliath who'd torn apart the building. The tone of his voice when he'd ordered the other men to tie Dave up; the way he kept squeezing the exercise grip in his hand; the cold, calculating look in his eyes . . .

She didn't want to think about what he might be capable of.

"How's your memory vis-à-vis our friend Mr. Castle?" the man asked. "Getting any better?"

Dave shook his head.

"Answer my question, please."

Silence.

Joan wasn't sure what to feel. Proud of Dave, absolutely. Terrified of what was going to happen next, for sure.

The man looked over at Stanley.

"Your friend here is about to have a bad day. You can save him by talking."

Stanley shook his head, too.

"We're wasting time, Quentin," one of the others said. "Let's shoot the fat one, see what that does."

"John, please." The man with the goatee—Quentin— held up a hand. "I know what I'm doing."

He turned back to Dave. "You're sure about this? You understand I have no interest in hurting you or your friend? That all I want is Frank Castle's whereabouts and then I will leave and never darken your doorway again?"

Still no response.

The man sighed.

“Okay. Bear in mind it didn’t have to be this way.”

He pulled up another chair then, and sat down right in front of Dave, blocking Joan’s view of her friend for a second.

He raised his hand, the hand he’d been holding the exercise grip in, only now Joan saw that she’d been wrong; it wasn’t an exercise grip, it was a pair of pliers. Old, rusty, steel pliers.

The man leaned forward and clamped the pliers tightly onto Dave’s nose ring.

“We’ll start with this.”

The man twisted, and he yanked, and somewhere in there, Dave began screaming.

“Jesus, that was a lot of blood.” Cutter shook his head.

“I never seen so much blood off a guy who didn’t croak afterward.”

“Head wounds,” Lincoln said. “You always get a lot of blood off head wounds.”

It had been a lot of blood, Glass reflected, coming down the stairs behind the two men, John Saint another step behind him. Toward the end, he’d had to stand well back to avoid splattering his clothes, but there had been no avoiding the stains on his hands. He wiped his palm with a handkerchief, and made a mental note always to have two cloths with him whenever he went out on business. This one was already soaked through.

Though he doubted he would ever meet another subject with quite so many facial piercings and, consequently, so many . . . opportunities.

“If they knew, one of them would have talked,” he said, following Lincoln and Cutter outside.

“That’s for damn sure,” John Saint said. “So where do we think he is?”

“Don’t know. But that’s his home base—no doubt about it. At some point, he’s coming back.” The pictures of the wife and kid had clinched it for him—this wasn’t just some place Castle had set up from which to spring a trap, this was where he lived.

“Okay.” John Saint turned to Cutter. “You stay. If— when— he shows up, kill him.”

“Got it, boss. I’ll be here.”

Cutter nodded, and headed back inside the building.

Glass stared after him, frowning. Something about the situation suddenly bothered him—all that blood, how far could Castle really have gone? Even if the fat man and the geek hadn’t been helping him, someone else in the neighborhood might be involved. What they ought to do, he thought, was knock on a few doors. See if anyone had seen anything.

Except it was already getting dark. Even he didn’t want to be around this neighborhood in the dark—especially if Castle was out there, watching them. Christ, the man had anticipated their every move so far; it wouldn’t surprise Glass in the least if he was a step ahead of them now.

“Quentin?” John Saint was looking at him funny. “You all right?”

Glass nodded. “Yeah. Fine.”

“All right. I’ll see you back at the club.” Saint climbed into his Cobra then, and roared off.

Quentin got in the backseat of the BMW, still thinking.

Castle was up to something now, he knew it. What that something was—

“The club?” Lincoln asked, turning in the driver’s seat.

Glass frowned. “No. Take me home, will you? I’ll catch up later.”

What he really needed to do, Glass decided, was go home and get a shower. Get cleaned up, get his head on straight again, and get ready for what he sensed was going to be a long, long night.

THIRTY-NINE

Howard Saint looked at the phone in his hand in disbelief.
“Say that again.”

Rebecca did. “Chadwick asked me to postpone the announcement.”

“Did he say why?”

“Not really. Just that he didn’t think it was a good time.”

“Not a good time?” Saint shook his head. That was a crock of shit, and he knew it. Chadwick was postponing for one reason, and one reason alone.

He was running scared. All the bad publicity, first the thing with Bobby, and now the incident at the Saint Tower, which Palmer was still playing up in his column, a week later . . .

Castle. It all came down to Castle. He couldn’t wait to dance on the man’s grave.

His other line beeped.

“Hang on a second, Rebecca.” Saint clicked in the second caller. “Howard Saint.”

“Pop.”

“John.” Saint sat up in his chair. “Tell me something good.”

Silence.

Fuck, Howard Saint thought. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Castle’s alive,” his son said. “The Russian’s dead.”

“Hold on.” Saint clicked over to Rebecca. “I’ll have to call you later,” he said, and disconnected her.

He sat for a moment in silence then, in his darkened office, and thought.

Outside the mansion, the sun had just set. The front lights were on; he could see Livia’s azaleas all lit up along the walkway to the tennis court.

His Bentley was in the driveway. His invitation to Senator Woodling’s Christmas party was on his desk. His beautiful wife was in the upstairs bedroom of his beautiful house. His

humidor was full of Cubans. And his cook, Mrs. Caprese, was making him steak tartare tonight.

He was Howard Fucking Saint, and anybody who thought he could cross Saint for even a second was sadly mistaken.

He clicked John back in.

"Where's Quentin?"

"Home. Getting cleaned up."

"Where are you?"

"At the club."

"Okay. Tonight we're closed for business. Make the calls."

"Closed? Ah, Pop, we got that DJ coming down from New York tonight. Can't we—"

"Closed, John. You hear me?"

His son sighed. "Yes, Pop. I hear you."

"Good. You make the calls. I want every warm body there, no excuses. Arrange food and drinks. I'll be there in an hour."

"What do I tell everyone?"

"You tell them we're going hunting."

He hung up.

On the desk was a picture of Bobby. Saint picked it up and smiled.

Tonight, son. Tonight we finish the job.

"Howard? Darling? Did you hear me?"

He looked up. Livia walked into the room, wearing her workout clothes.

"Sorry. What?"

"I said I'll be back after ten."

He frowned.

"It's Thursday."

"Oh, right." Her girl film. "Thursday. Of course. Have a great time."

"I will." She leaned over the desk and kissed him. "You have a good night, too."

He looked up at her and smiled.

"Oh, yes. I think I'm gonna do just that."

Castle opened his eyes. He was lying in the old freight elevator. Joan was leaning against him, her eyes red and rimmed with tears. How had he gotten here? He remembered the Russian, the knife wound, the stitches, passing out. . . .

He sat up with a jolt and looked at his watch.

Six twenty-five. There was still time.

Castle remembered something else now, the sound of cars pulling up in the front of the building, and he grasped the situation in a heartbeat. His neighbors had dragged him in here, to keep him safe.

Joan looked at him, realized he was awake, and started to sob.

“Frank,” she said. “Frank, they—”

He put a finger to his lips. No talking. Not till they made sure Saint’s men were gone. He became aware that, though his wound still throbbed, the worst of the pain had passed. His head was clear now.

He activated the hydraulics—the elevator rose up through the floor and clanked to a stop. The doors opened. Castle rolled out first, helped Joan, and then got to his feet.

Outside, it was dark and starting to rain. Drops pattered down on the skylight. Lightning flashed.

Bumpo sat on the couch before them, chest heaving. Joan went to him.

Footsteps came from the hall, and a shadow fell across the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. A second later, a man’s shoes followed. A big man’s shoes.

Joan tiptoed up beside him, a question in her eyes. He shook his head—wait here—and stepped carefully through the wreckage of his apartment, searching for something to use as a weapon.

His eyes fell on a piece of office equipment left by whoever had rented the loft before him. A paper cutter. A moment later, he had what he needed.

He waited until the man and the shoes had gone past again, heading back toward the staircase, before stepping quietly out into the hall.

It was one of them. Even though the man had his back to him, Castle recognized him instantly, from that day at the compound.

Rising on the balls of his feet, walking as close to the edges of the floorboards as he could to avoid any telltale creaks, Castle raised his makeshift weapon and approached.

Halfway down the hall, the man—prompted by instinct, perhaps, or the creak of a floorboard—turned. His eyes widened, and he went for his gun.

The blade of the paper cutter flashed.

The man's body tumbled down the stairs.

The head remained on the landing, eyes wide in disbelief.

Castle went back to the loft. Joan and Bumpo had gone to the corner of the room, and they were leaning over someone slumped in a chair. He could see only shadows, but he recognized the figure nonetheless.

Dave. They'd killed him.

Then the man moaned and turned his head, just enough that the light coming down from above touched his face.

Joan gasped and started crying all over again.

"Oh no . . ."

"Dave," Bumpo said. "Oh, Dave. Look what they did to you."

Castle was looking. Not just at the awful mess that had been made of Grayson's face, but at the table beside him, where every single one of his facial piercings now lay, bits of skin and hair and coagulated blood dangling off them. They'd been arranged very neatly on the table. As Castle stepped closer, he saw they spelled something: HI FRANK.

His blood boiled.

"Who did this?"

"Quentin," Bumpo offered. "That's what they called him."

"They tried to make me talk," Dave croaked. "I gave 'em nothing."

Castle didn't understand. "You don't know me," he said. "You don't owe me anything."

Bumpo was crying now, too, right along with Joan.

"I've brought you nothing but trouble. Why . . ." He shook his head. "Why were you ready to die for me?"

"You helped Joan," Dave said. "You stood up for me."

God help him, the man tried to smile then.

"You're one of us, Mr. Castle. You're family."

Family.

Castle closed his eyes.

He saw his mother fall. Saw Frank Sr. shotgunned from behind, saw Donal McCarey cut down trying to start his cycle, saw Dom Castiglione executed running down the beach . . .

Maria and Will lying still, on the pier.

Family.

Not again, he thought. Dear God, not again.

"Take him to a hospital," he said, and looked at his watch.

Six forty-five. Time to go.

He moved to the footlocker, unlocked it, and began to pack. Soapdish charges. Remote detonators—all of them. Antipersonnel mines. The last of the Claymores . . .

"Are you going to die tonight?"

Joan stood over him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Take Dave to the hospital, I said."

"Stanley took him. You didn't answer my question. Are you going to die tonight, Frank?"

He filled the first duffel and took out a second.

Extra rounds for the shotguns, extra clips for the Colts . . .
Ah.

The Kevlar vest. He set that aside to wear. The fireplug. The voice distorter.

Joan was still talking.

"Is that what you want? Damn it, Frank, talk to me."

"All I want is for it to be over."

He moved past her, unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk, and took out the pictures. Glass and his barber, Livia on her way to the movies . . .

"If you don't let go of the past," Joan said, "it'll never end. Believe me, I know. I know how you feel, Frank. You think you're the only one that ever lost family? The only one that ever—"

"My whole family," he said. "Everyone. Everything. My wife. My son."

"My son," she yelled. "I lost my son, too!"

Castle stopped in his tracks. That wasn't what his file—

"Stevie," Joan said, and even though she was still crying, maybe even harder than before, her voice was steady, calm, and full of a barely suppressed rage that went beyond any emotion Castle had ever seen from her before. "My boy. My husband, Earl, that sonuvabitch. I went off to work one day, and when I got back, they were gone. I haven't seen or heard a word from either of them since. Five years, Frank. I keep hoping, I had someone working on it for a while, but . . ."

She sighed, and Castle saw the anger go out of her like air from a balloon. "Every day, I live with it. I live with it, though—you understand? You can live with it, too, Frank. You don't have to die."

She sighed again, and slumped back down on the couch. "You don't have to die."

He stood there a moment, in the wreckage of the loft, and considered her words. He considered her.

She was a beautiful woman. He'd seen that before. What he hadn't seen: she was strong. Smart. Brave as all hell.

But the watch said six fifty-two.

He had to go.

He turned his back on Joan, reached into the drawer one final time, and pulled out the journal.

He pulled out a chair.

He began to write.

Behind him, he heard footsteps run to the door. It swung open; then, a second later, it slammed shut.

12 OCT 1856

I leave these declarations of intent so no one will be confused.

First declaration: Sic vis pacem, para bellum. It's Latin. The boot camp sergeant made us recite it like a prayer. Sic vis pacem, para bellum.

If you want peace, prepare for war.

FORTY

Seven-twelve. He'd hot-wired a Honda off the street and put it in the garage the night before. The little car had no pickup; a tractor trailer almost ran him off the interstate as he merged into traffic. The driver gave him the finger.

Castle was tempted, but he kept the Colt in his waistband.

Seven forty-two. He was running late: he parked the Honda a block away from the Centurion, squeezing it into an illegal space between two cars with state plates. Risky, but he wouldn't be gone long.

Seven fifty-one. Livia Saint appeared, running late, too. She unlocked the Jag, dropped her gym bag, and strode off quickly toward the theater.

Seven fifty-six. He placed the fireplug and jimmied the car open. Then he took her perfume and an earring.

He clicked the voice distorter onto the car phone and dialed.

"Quentin Glass."

"Quentin? Those photos of you? I changed my mind. The number is now ten thousand dollars. Be at Banana Republic in Westshore Plaza at nine P.M., or they'll have their own website."

Glass was breathing hard.

"You listen to me, you son of a—"

Castle hung up. He dialed another number.

"Micky Duka speaking."

"You're on."

"Okay. I'm ready. Don't worry about me. Everything here is —"

Castle clicked off.

Eight-oh-one. He dropped the Jag in gear and roared off.

Geez. You'd think the guy could be a little more personable. After what Micky was doing for him, what he'd

done for him already . . . gonna have to give Mr. Castle a little etiquette lesson next time we talk, Duka thought.

On the other hand . . .

Maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to remind old Frank about the past, and his particular role in it.

He steeled himself and knocked on Howard Saint's bedroom door.

"Who is it?"

"Duka, sir."

"Come on in."

Duka pushed the door open. Saint was just coming out of the closet, shrugging on a dinner jacket. He was wearing his gun tonight: Saint rarely wore his gun when he went to the club.

So Castle had been right about that. Tonight was the night.

"What is it?" Saint snapped.

Micky held out his hand.

"Mr. Saint? How do you want me to pay for this?"

"Pay for what?"

"I was detailing Mrs. Saint's car before, and found this ticket."

That was half true anyway: he had been detailing Mrs. Saint's car tonight, about an hour ago, in fact. Just before she'd left. Just before she'd cursed him out, as she did every time she saw him.

But the ticket . . . no. He hadn't found that at all, actually.

Saint frowned.

"That's unlike her. Give it here."

Micky handed it over.

"Thursday, October fifth, nine-fourteen P.M., Wyndham . . ." Saint read off the citation and shook his head. "No. That's not right."

Duka stayed silent, watching Saint stare at the ticket, watching the wheels turn in the man's head. He looked confused.

And then all at once, his expression hardened, and he turned to Duka.

"Where did you say you saw Quentin last Thursday?"

"The Wyndham Hotel. But—Mrs. Saint was at the movies at nine last Thursday."

Saint looked down at the ticket again.

"I mean . . . wasn't she?" Micky prompted.

The second he said those words, Duka wished he could have them back.

"Don't overplay it," Castle had warned him. "You understand? Let Saint connect the dots himself, Micky. That's very important."

"Yeah," he'd said then. "I understand."

But he'd fucked up. Saint wasn't buying it. The wheels were still turning, he was still trying to puzzle it out, he was —

Micky's hands were trembling. "Mr. Saint?" he ventured. "You all right?"

Saint looked up at him then, and Micky thought: Bingo.

"You have a key to Quentin's house?"

"Sure. I do his laundry."

"Get it. And get me the recent phone records."

"Mr. Glass's?"

"Livia's." His voice was like ice. "With each call listed."

"Yes sir," Micky said, backing away quick as he could; now he could see that Saint had not only bought it, he was on the verge of exploding, and he did not want to be around for that. "The key. The phone records. Can do."

Duka pulled the door shut behind him.

He could, indeed, do the key, and even the phone records. Had both in his pocket already, in fact.

Frank Castle had already done.

Eight twenty-six. Glass strode angrily out of his house, climbed into his car, and drove off. The bulge of the gun was obvious.

Eight twenty-nine. Castle made his way to the side of the house. He disconnected the alarm and entered through an open window.

Eight thirty-one. He found the bedroom.

Eight thirty-three. He reset Glass's alarm system and returned to Livia Saint's car. From his wallet, he pulled out the picture of himself, and Maria, and Jimmy. He sat for a while, thinking.

Eight thirty-six. He burned the picture and started the car.

Enough was enough.

He'd just have to be late for the club; Howard would have to understand. Because this shit could not continue.

Trying to blackmail Quentin Glass? Who did this asshole think he was? Who did he think Quentin Glass was, some two-bit hood who would roll over and play dead on command?

No. Someone else would be rolling over and playing dead tonight, although before they'd played dead, there was going to be pain. A lot of pain. That was why he'd brought the silencer, so he could take his time with this jerk when he showed. Glass wished he still had those pliers from earlier this evening—that was a tool he hadn't used before, lot of possibilities there.

But he still had his knife, of course.

He pulled into the little shopping plaza and parked.

Inside the Banana Republic, he positioned himself so that he could see the door, watch people come and go. He was certain he'd know his would-be blackmailer on sight; probably it was one of those little Greek kids from last summer, he'd decided. Smart mouths on those kids, both of them. He'd teach 'em.

He looked at his watch. Nine-fifteen. Glass shook his head.

Tell me this little fuck's going to stand me up again. I swear to God—

"Sir?"

Glass turned. A salesman—a nice-looking salesman, a young black kid in chinos and a blue button-down—was smiling at him.

“Need help with some underpants?” the boy asked, looking suggestively in the direction of the changing rooms.

Glass realized the two of them were all alone in this part of the store. He was almost tempted.

Almost.

“Go fuck yourself,” he said, and strode angrily toward the exit.

No more wild-goose chases, Glass decided. He had a connection down at the police department. He was going to get a trace on whoever made the call to him, and then he was going to take his knife and—

Wait. His knife, and a pair of pliers.

It was a wild-goose chase, had to be. Saint knew that, and tonight of all nights he did not have time for a wild-goose chase. John was holding down the fort at the club, but he needed to be there, too. Inspire the troops. Make them understand the importance of nailing Castle now, this very night, before that psycho had a chance to screw up the organization any further. That was the priority. This was a sideshow.

But he had to know. Quentin. His best friend, his comrade in arms. They’d been to war together how many times since they’d come down to Tampa? He’d lost count. Starting with that prick who Trafficante had tried to saddle them with, what was his name? Cohen. That’s right, Christopher Cohen. Trafficante had wanted Cohen to work with Saint and Quentin on those first big cocaine deals. As if Saint couldn’t see through that; Trafficante wanted Cohen to spy on them. And who had made Cohen decide that he’d rather work for Howard Saint than for Santo Trafficante? None other than Quentin Glass. After Trafficante died, who had made half the dealers in Tampa decide that they’d rather throw in with Saint than LoScalzo? Quentin Glass. Who had put a little bug

in the Toros' ears about a man who could handle every step of the money-laundering process for them so that they'd never have to bribe a customs official again (all right, so he wasn't in love with the Toros at the moment, but still . . .)? Glass again. And who'd stood up for him the day of his wedding? Quentin Glass, that was who. So this all was . . . crazy, that's all. Impossible, for another word.

But he had to know.

He brought the Bentley to a stop across the street and used the key Duka had given him to enter.

Saint hadn't been in Glass's house for a while, he realized. His friend had changed the place around a little. There was a new dining room table, and a couple new paintings, too, along the far wall. Landscapes, with little lights over them, just like the museums used.

Saint shook his head. Glass was the only guy he knew, the only bachelor, who had any interest at all in art, furniture, things like that. Good thing the guy never married, he and his wife would have fought like cats and dogs over how they ought to decorate. Except for his office, Saint let Livia handle all that stuff.

Livia. He sighed again and started up the stairs.

This part of the house hadn't changed at least. All the same pictures were here, pictures of Quentin with Bobby and John at their high school graduation, when they were kids, that fishing trip he'd taken the boys on . . . Pictures of Quentin with Red Archeletta, from back when Red was with him, and of Lincoln, and Cutter, and Rebecca, and of course of Quentin and him, breaking ground on the Saint Tower, of them out on the boat . . .

A lot of pictures, too, Saint noticed, of Quentin and Livia.

His hand tightened on the banister a second. Then he drew in a deep breath, and continued on his way.

He entered the bedroom and stopped in his tracks.

He smelled something. Cologne. Quentin wore cologne sometimes, except this was a little too . . . sweet for

cologne. It smelled familiar, though.

He frowned and flicked on the lights.

There was Quentin's bed, freshly made. Next to it, a night table. On the night table, something glittered. Saint recognized it at once.

It was one of Livia's earrings. One of the Harry Winston earrings he'd given her, in his best friend's bedroom.

He staggered back, almost as if he'd been punched in the gut.

Livia. And Quentin. It couldn't be.

But it was. He knew it for certain now, just as all at once, he knew what that familiar smell was. He picked up a pillow off the bed and inhaled, just to be certain.

Livia's perfume.

A car pulled up in the driveway. Saint went to the window.

"Well, well, well," he said. "Daddy's home."

The front door opened, and then shut.

Howard Saint pulled the switchblade from his pocket and started down the stairs.

Howard wasn't at the club yet, John had said, which was a good thing, because Glass needed a few minutes here to unwind. He couldn't call his friend at the police department till morning, but he could find out if the kind of trace he was thinking of was technically possible. He had another friend who knew all there was to know about cell phones, about how they worked. Glass would grab a drink to steady his nerves, and call him before heading out again.

He hung his jacket up on a chair, put his gun down on the kitchen table, and went into the living room to fix himself a martini.

"Evening, Quentin."

Glass almost jumped out of his skin.

Howard Saint stepped out of the hall and into the room before him.

For a second, Glass was too surprised to speak.

"Howard? What are you doing here?"

"Jim Bowie," his boss said.

Right then, Quentin saw the knife in his hand, and thought: What the fuck? "Excuse me?"

Howard clicked the blade open. "Jim Bowie—the river-boat gambler, who died at the Alamo. When a man accused him of cheating, they went ashore to a whorehouse, threw the furniture out, and stuck a knife, like this—" He held up the switchblade "—in the floor. Whoever walked out got the money."

Quentin couldn't think of a thing to say, except: "I didn't know that, Howard."

"It's true." Saint looked around the room. "Our only problem? Too much furniture."

"Howard, I'm not following this."

The smile disappeared from Saint's face.

"I'm accusing you."

"Of what?"

"Cheating."

"I've never taken a cent from you."

His boss took a step forward.

"Where were you going to do it next week? Back at the Wyndham Hotel?"

"Who? What are you talking about, Howard?"

"You," Saint said slowly, "and the whore."

"The whore. What . . . Howard, you're not making any sense."

Saint threw the knife down—thwack—into the hardwood floor.

It vibrated a moment, then went still.

What the hell was going on here? Howard was mad, beyond mad, he was honest-to-God livid, and Glass had no idea why.

"You're good. You are good, Quentin. You might have had a stage career. Maybe in the next life." His expression hardened. "Take the knife, Quentin. Or I will."

"I'm not touching it. I don't—"

Howard took the knife.

"This isn't funny." Quentin began backing up.

"It's not supposed to be."

Saint lunged forward and cut him on the arm. Glass looked down and saw blood soaking through his shirt.

"Howard! What—"

"How long have you worked for me? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

Saint lunged forward again. Quentin dodged.

His boss caught him with an elbow, right across the face. Bone shattered: Glass cried out in pain and disbelief.

His nose. Howard Saint had just broken his nose.

Saint rushed him again, slamming him into the wall, pinning him there with his body while he drew his knife arm back.

Quentin twisted to one side, barely avoiding the blade, and struck his boss square in the side with a fist. Saint staggered back, stunned.

"Howard, for God's sakes! Have you lost your mind?"

"You were my brother," Saint gasped. "I gave you everything. Denied you nothing. It wasn't enough?"

He charged again. They grappled like wrestlers: with his left arm, Glass held back the knife in Saint's right, their other two hands locked together, fingers intertwined, each straining for an advantage.

Slowly, Glass felt his fingers begin to bend.

Howard was strong, Quentin realized. Too strong.

He looked up. Saint's face was inches from his.

"Please. Don't."

Saint only smiled, and bore down harder.

The blade of the knife pricked Glass's chest. Quentin gasped and pushed it away.

"My Livia?" Saint bellowed, his face red with rage and concentration. "My Livia?"

Glass almost—almost—laughed. Was that what this was about? Saint thought he was fucking Livia?

“No.” He shook his head. “Livia and me—Howard, no. What did she tell you? It’s not true—I swear. . . .”

Saint growled at him.

The blade poked into his chest. Glass looked down and saw blood pool up around the tip.

The tip vanished within him, and pain shot through his system.

“Ah.” Glass moaned. “Don’t do this.”

Saint pressed. The knife went in deeper.

Glass tried to free his other hand: Howard wouldn’t let go.

“Howard . . . no. Howard. You’re—”

The knife went into the hilt.

Glass coughed, and tasted blood.

This wasn’t happening. This was not happening.

He looked into Howard Saint’s eyes.

“Please,” he managed. “Please. You’re killing me.”

Saint’s expression didn’t change.

All of a sudden, Quentin couldn’t breathe.

“Why—tell me . . .” he wheezed. “Howard.”

“Livia,” Saint said. “My Livia.”

Quentin blinked. He felt his body go limp.

And then he felt nothing at all.

FORTY-ONE

He was getting too old for this shit.

The thought made Weeks laugh—wasn't that what Gwen always used to say, when she was urging him to get out, to quit the bureau and find a job that would let them have a life? Let them be a family, at last, find some semblance of normalcy?

"You're getting too old to be playing cops and robbers like this, Jimmy." She'd said it to him on more than one occasion, though he was thinking of one time in particular now, when they were still living in Atlanta, right after the Olympics, right after they'd just had a night of sex that was the most unbelievable thing that had ever occurred between the two of them. He'd loved Gwen then, not only loved her but had been in love with her. And so he had taken the comment for what it was—a friendly jibe. That was before he'd put on fifteen pounds, before all these wrinkles on his face, before he'd been appointed AIC down here in Tampa, before the divorce, before the gambling and the drinking, and way, way before Yuri Astrov. Back when life had been good, and tomorrow had been something to look forward to.

Before Puerto Rico, and the nightmares that he just couldn't shake no matter how much booze he poured into his system or how many pills he took.

Maria. Will.

Weeks opened the door of his apartment and flicked on the lights. What a pit. He really had to get someone in here to clean; either that, or take a day off and do it himself. Might be therapeutic. And speaking of therapeutic . . .

He pulled off his jacket and holster, set them down on the couch, and headed for the liquor cabinet.

He'd just poured himself a shot when he heard the footsteps.

"How's work?"

Weeks turned and saw Frank Castle standing in the entryway between the kitchen and the living room; his heart started hammering again. The same way it did everytime he saw his old friend, only maybe a little bit faster even. Not without reason.

Castle had his gun. Castle was pointing his gun right at him.

"Why's that gun pointed at me?"

"It's how I say hi to everyone these days."

Frank smiled, as if it was a joke.

Only the gun didn't move.

Okay, Weeks thought. I can play.

"You want a drink?"

"You do."

"You got that right."

He slammed down the whiskey, felt around in his pocket till he came up with his lucky chip.

"So what's up, Frank?" he asked, knuckle-rolling the chip.

"I thought you were leaving town."

Castle shook his head.

"What happened to your Porsche, Jimmy?"

"I told you." Weeks shrugged, tried to look nonchalant. "I buy American now."

"I didn't see your fishing boat outside. That was built thirty-five miles down the coast. That's not American enough for you?"

Jimmy needed another drink. But he didn't want Castle to see he was nervous, even though he was very, very nervous, indeed; he did not like the direction these questions were taking, did not like the tone of his old friend's voice, did not like the gun in his hand.

"You know what they say about owning a boat, Frank? Your two happiest days are the day you buy it and the day you sell it."

"Uh-huh. And do they say that about TVs and stereos?"

Castle looked around the apartment then, and Jimmy realized that, yeah, the place was not only a pit, it was an empty pit; he had sold everything he owned—almost—to feed his jones. To feed the Toros.

God. He was pathetic.

He looked at Frank, whose eyes held no pity.

“And what about wristwatches, Jimmy? Do they say that about wristwatches?”

Castle was wearing his Rolex, Weeks saw. The one he’d given him at the retirement party. The twin to Jimmy’s old watch, which was long, long gone.

He started knuckle-rolling the chip faster and faster.

“I had my money in high-tech stocks, Frank; my broker kept saying don’t sell, don’t sell. I’m an old soldier, what can I say? I followed orders. Now I’m broke.”

Castle shook his head.

“I told you not to gamble, Jimmy. Didn’t I tell you that?”

Weeks felt his hands sweating. The chip slipped from them and rolled across the floor.

Castle bent down and picked it up. His eyes widened.

Shit, Jimmy thought. The chip. It was from the Toros’ place.

It had the bull emblem on it.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “Okay, Frank. You’re right. I was gambling. A lot. Gambling’s like alcoholism, you know? It’s a disease. Before you can cure yourself, you have to hit bottom. And I did. I hit it hard, Frank. The car . . . the car was a dream come true for me. And the boat . . . I miss that boat every day. You know how much I loved that boat. But I swear—I’m done now. I gave it up. Gave my problems over to a Higher Power. I’m clean, Frank. I’m goddamn broke—” he risked a smile “—but I’m clean.”

Castle studied him a long hard minute.

Then he smiled and put the gun down on the table.

“Okay, Jimmy. I’m glad to hear it. I’m glad for you. Pour me a drink, would you?”

"Sure. Whiskey?"

"You know it."

Castle walked across the room then to the empty stereo cabinet. He slid the doors open. "The CDs too, Jimmy? Jesus. You had a great collection."

"Yeah. I know." Weeks poured his friend a drink and started back to the table.

"You know what's funny?" Castle asked. "A bank can repossess everything you own—except your phone. They can get a court to hold you to ten dollars worth of calls a month, but they can't take your phone."

"Yeah." Weeks set the glass back down on the kitchen table, right next to his gun. He didn't know what his friend was getting at, but . . . "Yeah," he said again. "That's funny."

"It was a good thing for me that the bank didn't repossess your phone, Jimmy. Right? That day you called, warned me about getting out of town? I would never have gotten that message if the bank had taken your phone. Or the hot dog."

"Hey, for you—I would've used the office phone," Weeks said, smiling, though suddenly, he was feeling on edge again. What was up with Frank? Why was he asking all these questions?

"What I don't get though," Castle continued, "is this. Why did you call me that day, Jimmy? Why didn't you run when you saw that I was still alive?"

Frank turned around then, and the look he gave him made Jimmy's blood run cold.

He figured it out, Weeks realized. Shit, he figured it out.

Jimmy grabbed the gun up off the kitchen table and pointed it at Castle.

"How long have you known?"

"You mean for certain? Enough to, say, bet on?" The man's smile was ice cold. "Not until now."

Weeks nodded. What to do now? What could he do? Castle would go to Sandoval, and then . . .

No. He couldn't allow it. He couldn't.

He looked up at Castle and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Frank. I swear to God I'm sorry."

"So am I, Jimmy."

Weeks's finger tightened on the trigger, and then he squeezed.

Click.

Castle reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of bullets.

"Oh, no," Weeks said.

"Oh, yes. I may not have known for sure—but I'm not a betting man."

"Okay." Weeks thought frantically. "Okay. I'll tell you who did it, Frank."

"You did it, Jimmy."

"No. That's not right. Saint did it. Howard Saint."

"No. You did it. And you know what? I do know why you called me that day. Because you were sick, and you needed my help. That's what friends are for, right? Well, guess what, Jimmy?" He held up the bullets. "I'm here to help."

"What are those for?"

"You were in the army. You figure it out."

Weeks picked Castle's drink up and drained it.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm not going to do anything. You are." Castle threw him a bullet.

Weeks caught it, and almost pissed in his pants.

"Frank?"

Castle drew his own gun then, and pointed it right at Weeks's forehead. From the look on his face, Jimmy had little doubt he would use it.

Castle cocked the trigger, and then he had none.

"Let's say good-bye like the friends we were. Not like animals."

Weeks stood frozen a moment. There had to be some way out of this, part of him was thinking, but part of him knew

that this was what he deserved, all he deserved, that it was in fact the only half-honorable way out for him.

That part of him chambered the round.

Then the other part of him spoke.

"I can't."

"You can," Castle said. "You will."

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

His own voice sounded funny to him. As if it was coming from a long way away, like maybe halfway around the world. Iraq, maybe. Khafji.

He'd been a good man there. Another time, another place—maybe he could be a good man again.

He put the gun under his chin, and looked up at Castle.

"I'll say hello to them for you, Frank. Will and Maria."

Castle shook his head. "Where you're going, Jimmy? I don't think so. Sorry."

Weeks nodded. Maybe he was right. They said if you asked forgiveness though—right up until the last minute, the last second—you could be saved.

He shut his eyes and asked.

And when he was done praying, he squeezed the trigger.

FORTY-TWO

Who did this bitch think she was?

"You'll put me on with the manager. This instant. Or I will have your job."

"Mrs. Saint, I'm telling you, I can't reach the manager at this moment. Mr. Sanders is on vacation. He will be back on Monday."

"Did I ask you his schedule?" Livia Saint turned into the mansion's driveway and eased the Jaguar to a stop. "I pay quite a handsome sum of money to belong to your club, and for that kind of money, I expect service."

"Which I'm trying to give you, ma'am. If you'll start at the beginning—"

"I do not," Livia continued, ignoring the young woman's offer, "expect my jewelry—my Harry Winston jewelry, given to me by my husband, a gift of great sentimental value—to be stolen while I use your club, and I most certainly do not expect to get attitude from an underling such as yourself simply because I wish to discuss the problem with senior management. Do I make myself clear?"

Silence.

"Yes, Mrs. Saint," the woman said finally. "I will find Mr. Sanders and have him call you."

"Tonight."

"Yes, ma'am. Tonight."

Livia hung up, frowning. Little twit. She'd have Sanders fire her—the man was wrapped around her little finger—except, she realized, she'd just forgotten the woman's name. Ah, well. Not important. But the earring was. She would have Sanders get to the bottom of that problem immediately.

She walked into the house and set her purse down in the foyer.

"Maria?"

No answer. Where was that girl? She wanted a drink—after the shock of finding the earring gone, and that last bit of nastiness, she needed to settle her nerves.

“Maria?”

Fine. She could get her own drink. She could get another maid as well. Help these days . . .

She took off her coat, turned around, and found one of Howard’s men—she didn’t know this one’s name; frankly, she had a hard time telling any of them apart, except for Quentin, of course—staring at her.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Pretty well.” He smiled.

She snorted. Brute. Howard knew she didn’t like having these men around, particularly in this part of the house. They never wiped their shoes; they touched everything with their greasy hands; they smelled . . . she wanted this one out of her sight, now. She’d have Howard fire him, in fact. Him and that little prick Duka.

“Where is my husband?”

The man took a long look at her, and then—she watched it happening, and shook her head in disbelief—he took out a cigarette and lit it.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s called smoking.”

“You know there’s no smoking in the house.”

“Yeah. That’s the rule. Because you don’t like it.”

“That’s right. I don’t like it.”

He took another puff.

Unbelievable. “What’s your name?”

“I go by Lincoln.”

“Well, Lincoln, my husband, who pays your salary, is the one who made that rule, and you’ll answer to him for this.”

“Fine by me.”

Then he stepped forward and exhaled right in her face.

Livia was, all of a sudden, very, very nervous.

“What is this about?” she asked.

"I've decided to make a few changes around here."

The voice came from the second-floor landing above her. She looked up and saw Howard dangling the Llanes vase she'd won last week at the country club auction over the railing.

Now she was more than nervous. She was scared.

"Darling? What—"

Howard dropped the vase. It smashed against the marble floor and shattered into a million pieces.

Livia stared at it in disbelief.

"That's . . ." She looked up at her husband. "Howard. That was ten thousand dollars. Of your money. Why—?"

Her mink flew over the rail. Next came the ermine stole, and then the leopard-skin coat. Then her clothes, and her shoes, and her jewelry, and all the pictures of her and Howard, of her and the twins, of the family together. Lincoln picked them up, one by one, and threw them out the door.

Her life. Her entire life was out there on the lawn.

She looked up and saw Howard coming down the stairs.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she begged.

He walked up to her and hit her across the face. Hard. She fell to the floor and started crying. Howard had never, ever raised a hand to her before.

"I don't know what's happened. Just talk to me, Howard, I can fix it, I can change—"

"I know about you and Quentin."

She shook her head. "Quentin? What are you—"

"You went to the movies last Thursday, like you always do?" he snarled. "The eight o'clock show?"

"Yes. Yes." She didn't understand why he was asking, what on earth he was talking about. Quentin and her? He couldn't think that—

"But you called Quentin at nine, from your car phone? How is that possible?"

"It's not, of course. Because I didn't call him." She felt a glimmer of hope—here was something concrete to which

she could respond; she could find people who'd seen her in the theater, witnesses who could swear that she'd sat through the whole film. Howard would have to abandon this ridiculous fantasy he'd constructed in his mind, then, and they could pretend this had all never happened.

He was smiling.

"You didn't call him?"

"No."

"Then how do you explain this?"

He held a piece of paper up in front of her face. A phone bill. Her cell phone bill.

She looked at the call he'd circled and felt her knees go weak.

"There's an explanation," she said weakly.

"Sure there is. You were fucking him. You were fucking my best friend."

"No, of course not. I . . ." She hesitated. Quentin had made her promise never to tell, but she had to now. It was her life; he'd understand. "Howard." She forced herself to smile, ha-ha, this was all so ridiculous, just a ridiculous misunderstanding. "Darling. That would be a little hard to accomplish, since Quentin—"

"Hard to accomplish now, true."

Saint drew back the curtain that led to the study.

There, on the floor of the study, was the body of Quentin Glass wrapped up in a rug. Livia hadn't seen a lot of dead bodies, but she knew she was looking at one now.

She gasped. "Oh my God. Howard?"

He thrust another piece of paper into her face.

"And you really should pay your parking tickets."

"My parking tickets? What . . ." She looked at the citation. Her Jaguar. The Wyndham Hotel. Last week, nine o'clock . . . Thursday.

"No." She tried to smile again but couldn't. "This is . . . Howard, I don't know what . . . you thought we . . . Quentin and I? Howard. Quentin was gay."

The rage in her husband's eyes was dreadful to behold.

"You'll say anything now, won't you?"

He shoved something shiny in her face.

The missing earring.

"This," he said, gritting his teeth, "was . . . in . . . his . . . bedroom."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Howard, I was just—you can call the club—"

Howard spun on his heel.

"Bring her," he said, and Livia Saint felt an elbow on her arm then. She started crying again as Lincoln dragged her to the limo, using no more care than he would have with a sack of potatoes.

He put the bitch in the backseat, next to Lincoln.

He sat facing them, for a couple reasons. One, so he could watch her react, as she realized where they were headed. Two, so he wouldn't have to touch any part of her body with his. So he wouldn't have to smell it, that perfume that he'd bought her by the gallon, the same smell he'd found on Quentin Glass's pillow.

Okay. Three reasons.

"Howard," she said again. "You have to listen to me."

Lincoln raised a hand—the same hand he'd already struck her with twice during the ride, when she'd tried this Quentin-was-gay crap on him—and Livia shut her mouth. What kind of fool did she think he was, Saint wondered, that he could be friends with a man thirty years, be closer to him than a brother, and not know he was a fruit?

The limo slowed. Ah. Here they were.

"Recognize the neighborhood, Livia? Ybor City? Little Cuba? I saw you for the first time three blocks from here."

She was crying.

Saint smiled. "Twenty-three years ago, it had color. Now it's only for hookers. You'll fit right in."

The limo pulled over.

“What do you want me to do, Howard?” she asked. “Just tell me—I’ll do it. Whatever you want.”

He nodded to the door. Lincoln reached across her and opened it.

“I want you to get out, Livia. That’s what I want.”

Mascara ran down her face. “Howard, I beg you. Our son—don’t do this, think about John—”

He raised a hand. “Not *our* son. *My* son. You have nothing to do with him from now on.”

A look of absolute despair crossed her face. “You can’t do that!”

“Can’t do that?” He felt a rush of fury. “After what you did, you’re gonna tell me what I can and can’t do? You fuckin’ . . .”

He dragged her out of the car and threw her to the ground. Threw her into the gutter, where she belonged, and dragged her through it. The whole time she kept screaming his name, just like she used to when they had sex. Howard this, Howard that, probably used the exact same words with Quentin.

She clawed at his leg, sobbing hysterically.

He reached down and ripped the wedding ring off her finger.

“Don’t do this!” she screamed.

“You did it to yourself.” He got back in the limo.

Lincoln didn’t say a word.

Worowski was driving. He turned around. “Where to, boss?”

“The club. But take thirty-one, Carl. And stop at the overpass.”

“Yes, sir.”

They pulled away from the curb. Livia had gotten to her feet and was watching them drive away, her chest heaving. Crying, all hysterical . . .

Saint shook his head.

He knew Livia. She would stand there, feeling sorry for herself for a few minutes, but just a few minutes. Then she would start to get pissed, and she would find a phone. She would call one of her friends, who would come pick her up, and she'd be clean and safe and in a nice warm house an hour from now. And tomorrow morning, he would get a call from her lawyer, who would propose some very harsh divorce terms, and allege a lot of things that would, of course, have to come out in court if a mutually agreeable settlement could not be reached.

Too bad for Livia there wasn't going to be any tomorrow morning.

Bastard. Stupid, selfish bastard. He was thinking with his balls, not his head. His fucking male ego . . . how did he think a nasty divorce was going to play out with his precious Bobby Chadwick? Or the voters of Florida, for that matter? Because after what he'd done to her tonight, there was for sure going to be a very nasty divorce in Howard Saint's future.

Footsteps sounded behind her. Livia turned and saw two men coming out from the shadows, and she suddenly realized that Howard had been right about one thing.

This neighborhood was a hell of a lot different than it had been twenty-three years ago. A hell of a lot more dangerous.

She'd do well to be out of here as quickly as possible.

But she didn't need to panic. Panic showed that you were afraid, and they would pounce on you like shark on chum if they knew you were scared. All she had to do was walk quickly and calmly to a phone.

She took a step, and her heel snapped.

"Goddamn it!" she said.

"Hey, pretty lady! What's the matter?"

She turned. Those two men were coming toward her.

She ignored them and hobbled down the sidewalk, moving a little quicker now. Ah. She knew where she was now. The

train overpass was just ahead, and there was a pay phone there—at least there used to be. She would pick up that phone and call . . . who? Her brother, in St. Petersburg? Marjorie Hillings? No, Jennifer. She would call Jennifer, her divorced friend Jennifer, who would certainly understand her predicament. Would sympathize. Would know all the best lawyers.

She hobbled on. Sure enough, there it was. Same old pay phone, in the same old spot. Livia smiled for the first time in what felt like hours.

And then she heard the footsteps behind her, even closer. She turned. The two men were running toward her.

She kicked off the shoe with the broken heel and began to run, too. Ten feet on, she kicked off the other shoe as well, gasping for breath and running full out toward the pay phone.

Ten feet away from it, she stopped running and sighed in frustration.

There was no handset. Just a severed cord.

Okay. Okay. This was Ybor City. She'd grown up here; she'd been putting thugs like these two in their place since she was twelve years old.

She took a deep breath and turned around to face them.

A car rounded the corner, rap music blaring so loud she couldn't hear herself think. The two guys chasing her saw it and stopped.

Adios, motherfuckers, Livia thought as the vehicle pulled up in between her and her pursuers.

It was a lime green Cadillac. A very familiar-looking lime green Cadillac. The doors opened.

Mike and Joe Toro climbed out.

A chill went down her spine. She looked to her pursuers.

Help, she was going to say, and then stopped, because her pursuers were smiling, too. Smiling and, she saw now, wearing matching jackets, jackets with little bull emblems on them. The bull. El Toro.

Mike smiled, too, and took a step toward her.

Livia drew herself up with what dignity she could muster, and glared.

"I am Howard Saint's wife."

"The Howard Saint out to us for fifty million?" Mike shook his head. "That Howard Saint?"

"He just called us." Joe stepped up next to his brother. "Said he was delivering an interest payment on the money he owes us."

The two men looked at each other, smiled, and then looked straight at her.

Livia's blood ran cold.

"No," she said, backing away.

"Yes. He said you were ours. We can do with you what we want."

Mike took another step forward. So did Joe. Then he began circling around to her left. Livia's stomach turned. She couldn't let them flank her, couldn't let them get hold of her, these animals. She knew what they would do.

She took another step back and then stopped.

The railing was at her back.

"What, is she going somewhere, Joe?" Mike asked.

"Doesn't seem that way, Mike—does it?"

Livia's mind raced. She thought about jumping—it was only twenty feet or so down. When she was a kid, growing up here, Bobby Morales had done it one time, no problem. Leapt right down to the tracks when a cop was chasing him, got away scot-free.

Only problem was, she wasn't a kid anymore.

"So, Livia," Mike said. "About the other day—"

"You pigs," she said, her voice cracking. "You make me sick. You'll never rape me."

"Oh? Disgusting, is that what we are?"

"You hear that, Joe? We're disgusting." Mike came toward her, shaking his head. He was so close now that she could smell the cigar smoke on him, the cheap cologne, the

onions . . . she wanted to kick him in the balls, but she knew if she did that, he'd hurt her even worse.

Joe stepped up closer, too. She braced herself for the worst.

"You're too disgusting to rape." Joe looked at his brother. "Am I right?"

"Absolutely." Mike looked at her, and he smiled. "Whoever said anything about rape?"

"Just her," Joe said. "Mrs. Howard Saint."

"Right. Our interest on the fifty million. But you know what, Joe?"

"What, Mike?"

"I'm not interested." Mike Toro grabbed her right arm.

Livia looked at him, suddenly confused.

"And neither am I." His brother grabbed her left arm.

And then suddenly, all at once, she was flying through the air.

They threw me off the bridge, she thought, her eyes wide. They—

Howard Saint saw his wife land, and bounce, and then lie still, and he thought: Good.

He lit a cigar and looked across the tracks to the overpass. The Toros were leaning over the railing, looking down at Livia, too. Saint was a little disappointed, to be honest. He'd told Mike and Joe to do whatever they wanted with Livia, and he had been expecting something a little more . . . sensational. Ah, well. The job was done, which was all that counted. And speaking of jobs . . .

Castle. The hatred burned within him hotter than ever; maybe it was because tonight had turned his world upside down, had stripped him of the things he loved most, leaving behind only his thirst for vengeance; at the moment, killing the man, seeing him dead, was all he could think of.

He was about to tell Worowski to head for the club when down below, on the train tracks, he saw Livia lift her head and begin to crawl.

"Look at that." Saint shook his head in admiration. She was as strong as she was beautiful: it was a shame.

In the distance, a train whistle blew. Livia's head snapped up, and she began looking around frantically.

"What is that, the Metro?" Lincoln asked.

"Yes," Saint said.

"I heard they were talking about extending the line, Mr. Saint. Maybe bringing it south to Channelside?"

"It'll probably happen." Saint nodded. There was a lot of money to be made in those kind of government contracts.

On the tracks, Livia was crawling—well, not really crawling, more like dragging herself along—as fast as she could.

Not fast enough, though. Saint could hear the train now, and a second later, its headlights fell on his wife.

It roared out from under the overpass—Saint couldn't be sure, but Livia might have screamed then—and then disappeared in the distance.

When he looked down again, Livia was gone.

"Carl?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Saint?"

"The club. I'd like a martini."

"The club. Coming right up."

As they pulled away, Saint caught sight of Mike Toro, standing at the overpass. The man gave him a big thumbs-up.

Saint raised his cigar and saluted.

Eleven oh-two. He stood next to a pay phone on Canaveral Boulevard, two blocks down from the big Saint Motors sign. The Honda was running. He would wait one more minute.

The phone rang.

"Speak."

"It's Duka."

"And . . ."

"Oh my God, you were right. He threw all her stuff out on the lawn, and drove off with her in the limo. She ain't comin'

back, is my guess. Not now, not ever.”

“When was this?”

“Twenty minutes ago, maybe. Maybe more.”

“What about Glass?”

“He’s here. Rolled up in a carpet, dead as a doornail.”

“Good. Good work, Micky.”

“Right. So, ah—I was wonderin’. You know that fifty million that flew out the window last week from the Tower. You didn’t by chance—”

Castle hung up.

He drove the Honda two blocks north, past the club. The Bentley still wasn’t there, but plenty of other cars were, John Saint’s Shelby among them.

Just past the Saint Motors lot, he turned right. A block down, he stopped and parked the Honda.

Eleven thirty-six. His turn, now, to go to work.

Second declaration: Frank Castle is dead. He died with his family. Murdered, as they were, by an act of such brutality, such savagery, that civilization lacks an appropriate response. Hence,

Third declaration: In such extreme circumstances, the law is by definition inadequate. To shame its inadequacy, it is necessary to act outside the law, to pursue natural justice. This is not vengeance. Revenge is not a valid motive—it is an emotional response. Vengeance serves no larger purpose. Society does not benefit from vengeance. Violent men are not deterred by acts of vengeance. The only appropriate response to their actions is the one I have chosen to pursue: a course of purposed, intentional violence. Violence intended to instruct, as much as destruct.

A course, in a word, of punishment.

FORTY-THREE

“Okay.”

Howard Saint dropped the briefcase on the table and opened it so that everyone could see what was inside.

“Fifty thousand apiece, and fifty more to the man who kills him.”

His men—his enforcers, as he liked to think of them, Lincoln, Worowski and Gable, the Moroni brothers, a half dozen more—all took a step forward, their eyes lighting up with sudden greed.

Predictable, Saint thought. So predictable.

But that was why he loved them.

“Ah.” He held up a hand, and the men stopped moving.

“Just so we’re clear—you take this money, you’re in this until it’s over.”

“When Castle’s dead, Mr. Saint. Is that right?”

Saint nodded at Lincoln. “When Castle’s dead.”

As Saint expected, his words of warning didn’t stop anyone from coming forward. Too bad, he thought, because before this night was finished, he was sure some of them were going to regret their impulsiveness. Castle wasn’t going to go down easily.

But he was going to go down.

Saint let John hand the money out, and he took the stairs up to his office. On the way up, he passed a picture of Livia and him with the boys. He ripped it off the wall and threw it back down the stairs.

In the office, Saint poured himself a drink and sat down behind his desk. He had a lot to sort out; he realized he’d never called Rebecca back about Chadwick, and the announcement, and now he had to tell her to pull all the press about Livia, too. And he had to get some kind of story together for the cops about his wife—when was the last time he’d seen her and all that sort of thing, because her

body, or what was left of it, was going to turn up sooner or later. And Glass—he needed another story there. Which struck him funny, all of a sudden, because usually it was Quentin who helped him with things like that. Quentin had a good head on his shoulders.

Saint took a deep breath then and drained his glass.

“Pop?” John was standing in the doorway.

“Hey. Come on in. You want a drink? I’m gonna have another drink.”

“No, thanks. Where were you? Where’s Quentin?”

Saint topped off his glass and sat back down.

“He’s wrapped up in something.”

“Tonight? He’s wrapped up in something tonight?”

“Yeah.” Saint couldn’t help it. He giggled. “He’s gonna be wrapped up in it awhile.”

John looked at him strangely.

“Pop? You all right?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m good.” He took a sip of his drink. Maybe John could help him with this stuff; he’d always been good at making up stories. Good at lying, anyway, when he was a kid. Or was that Bobby?

“I called home before, trying to find you. Nobody answered.”

“I was out.”

“Yeah, but . . . where’s Mom?”

“She’s . . . your mother’s gone, John.”

“What?”

“She’s gone.” He looked up at his son, and, once more, Howard Saint couldn’t help himself. Maybe it was the booze. Maybe it was the stress of everything that had happened tonight. Maybe he was just losing it. “Your mother took the train,” he said, and then he burst out laughing again.

Twelve thirty-four. He returned from the Saint Motors lot, carrying the empty duffel over his shoulder. He put it back in the trunk of the Honda and loaded the weapons bag with the detonators and the remaining charges.

He slipped on the Kevlar vest, and pulled the crossbow from the backseat.

Twelve forty-six. He returned the night-vision goggles to the bag, having completed a sweep of the block around the Saint and Sinners building. No perimeter forces whatsoever. Saint had concentrated all his men inside the building. A tactical error; the man was slipping.

Somehow, Frank Castle was not surprised by that.

Twelve fifty-two. He found the service entrance Duka had told him about, and entered the building.

“I’m gonna say something to him.” Shania Goggins— who had been born Beth Goggins but had changed her name because she looked a little bit like the singer, although she was six inches taller and, on a good day, thirty pounds heavier—pulled another scoopful of cubes out of the ice maker and dumped it in the bucket on top of the bar. Then she started in again. “Because it’s not right. Mel, it’s just not right.”

Melanie Carter looked around nervously. There was no one in earshot, thank God—the only other people in the room, in fact, were Yasmin and Gloria, who were working the other end of the bar, and, of course, Mr. Saint’s men, the men with the big guns—but still, you didn’t want to make a habit of saying anything bad about Saints and Sinners, or the folks who ran it. In her experience, bad things happened to people who did that.

“Listen, honey,” she said, shoving a bottle of Dom Perignon into the newly filled ice bucket. “Speaking as a friend? I would recommend you keep those opinions to yourself, understand?”

Shania shook her head. “No. No, I don’t understand. Mel, how do we make our money? Tips. And who is going to tip us tonight?” She waved her arms to indicate the empty bar. “No one, that’s who. Because we’re closed. So I don’t see why we have to work if we’re closed.”

Melanie sighed. Shania was her friend, but sometimes, the girl could be a little thick.

"Because John Saint called us in, that's why."

"What, they need four waitresses for a dozen guys? Does that make sense to you?"

"No. But John's a good guy. He'll take care of us, end of the night. Don't worry."

"Yeah." Her friend snorted. "I heard how John Saint takes care of the waitresses around here."

They both smiled.

"No, honestly," Melanie said then. "He's a big tipper. All his guys are."

"Even those two?" Shania nodded at the pair patrolling the room. "You think they're big tippers?"

Melanie studied them, then shook her head. "Nah," she finally said. "They look like deadbeats."

One of the men looked up then and grunted really loudly.

For a second, Melanie was afraid he'd overheard them talking. Oh God, she thought. We're in trouble now.

But the man stayed right where he was, looking completely dumbfounded. Looking, for some reason, down at his chest.

Melanie looked, too.

There was an arrowhead sticking out of it.

Shania screamed, and dropped the scoopful of ice she'd been holding in her hand.

"Tony!" The other man patrolling the room ran to his friend. "Tony! What . . ."

He stopped talking all at once, because, as Melanie saw, there was now an arrow sticking out of his throat, too.

It was her turn to scream then.

A man stepped out from the shadows near the kitchen—a big, scary-looking man, carrying a crossbow at his side and wearing a shirt with a huge skull painted across the chest.

"Go," he said.

Melanie and the others ran.

The skull. Castle thanked Will again—for the symbol, this time, not the shirt.

Because this time, the skull was painted on his Kevlar vest. A little modification he'd made a few days back, after realizing that practical considerations during the assault—practical, as in he might get shot at—would prevent him from wearing the shirt. And he still wanted to use the symbol to make an impression. Now . . .

And a little later this evening.

One oh-nine. He ran a trip wire across the front door of the club and attached a charge. As he headed for the stairs, the intercom by the dumbwaiter buzzed.

"Hey, Tony!"

Castle stopped in his tracks.

What the heck, he thought, and pressed the talk button.

"Yo."

"We need more champagne up here."

Castle turned. The champagne, still packed in buckets, sat on the bar where the waitresses had abandoned it. He considered it and the ordnance remaining in his bag, and then he smiled.

He pressed the talk button again.

"Coming right up," he said.

Then he set down the weapons bag and got to work.

Cutter. Poor Cutter. John Moroni had just called with the news.

In a way though, Howard Saint was glad. Cutter's death meant Castle was still here in Tampa. That had been a fear of his, momentarily, that after the Russian, Castle would decide to abandon his vendetta and head for greener pastures. But he hadn't run—or if he had, he'd come back.

And soon enough, they would finally meet. For the first and last time.

Saint could hardly wait.

He removed a Cuban from the humidor and lit it. Crossed his office, and exited out into the upstairs bar. Lincoln and

John were playing pool. Worowski, Bob Graves, and three men whose names he forgot entirely—or maybe he'd never met them, actually; now that he thought about it, they were Quentin's hires—stood around the bar, drinking champagne. They'd gone through a half-dozen bottles already, and Graves was carrying another over to the table, Saint saw. All of it Dom Perignon. What was that, sixty a bottle?

He made a mental note to dock them the money out of their salaries. Christ, he owed the Toros fifty million, he had to start watching every penny he could.

Graves, who'd just pulled another bottle out of the ice bucket, suddenly froze where he stood and said in a loud yet strangely resigned voice: "Oh, fuck!"

Saint saw something running from the bottle back into the bucket. A wire. What—

Instinct made him dive behind the bar. It was the only thing that saved his life.

A huge explosion sounded—the ceiling caved in. The floor shook. Plaster dust and smoke filled the air.

He peeked over the bar. A lot of his men were dead, he saw that instantly. One of Lincoln's legs was trapped underneath the pool table; Worowski was trying to help push it off. His son was in the office, shaking his head, trying and for some reason failing to get to his feet.

"John!" Saint shouted. "Are you all right?"

Right then, the elevator doors opened, and a man stepped out into the smoke, weapon raised before him. For an instant, the two of them locked eyes.

Castle, Saint thought. And then he shouted: "Kill him!"

Castle stood his ground as gunfire erupted around him.

Two men emerged from a room that the blast hadn't touched; he cut them down on the spot. Another peered out from behind a door; Castle blew the door and the man away.

The wall next to him exploded. Castle turned in time to take a shotgun blast right to the chest: the Kevlar shredded, and the rifle flew from his hands.

He reached for the Colt, as the man with the shotgun—the man from Puerto Rico, the man he'd left alive, his mistake, which he'd correct now—stepped forward and fired again. Castle staggered; the Kevlar held. He tried to raise the Colt, but he was too slow; the shotgun went off a third time.

The last of the armor shredded. The Colt flew away.

Castle was defenseless.

He lunged forward and grabbed the barrel, twisting it down just as the man fired again, and screamed.

Blood flowed from the man's shoe, what there was left of it.

Castle grabbed the shotgun away from him and smacked him across the face with the barrel. The man half lunged, half fell forward, and got his hands around Castle's neck.

He began to squeeze. Castle tried to force the shotgun up between his arms to break his grip, but he didn't have the leverage, or the strength, or the oxygen.

The man gritted his teeth and squeezed harder.

Castle dropped the shotgun and, in one fluid motion, drew his knife and stabbed upward, into the man's hand.

The man screamed and loosened his grip. Castle kept driving the knife upward, driving it through the man's hand and up against the wall, and then into the wall, pinning his hand there.

Then he drew a second knife from his boot and finished it.

Castle stepped back from the wall, breathing hard, still trying to catch his breath. Where had Saint gone? His eyes scanned the area, searching. . . .

And fell on what appeared to be the remnants of an office, and the man trapped within it.

Big Richie, Howard Saint decided as the elevator descended. He would call Richie, get a few of his men up from Miami, and they would handle this psycho. The skull on his chest—what was that about? Who did the man think he was—some kind of superhero?

The elevator doors opened. Saint looked out, half expecting to see Castle waiting for him. But there was no one there. Only the bodies of the men he'd left to guard the front entrance.

Castle was going to kill them all, Saint realized. At which point, he remembered John, in the office upstairs. The two of them were all who were left—he couldn't leave his son to die.

Maybe they'd taken care of him, Saint thought then. Lincoln, and whoever else was left. Maybe they killed him. Maybe.

He wasn't going to stick around to find out.

He started heading for the front door.

Worowski burst out of the stairwell just ahead of him. The man saw him and began to babble.

"It's a slaughter up there, Mr. Saint. A goddamn slaughter. You can keep the fifty large; I can't do it. I don't want to do it. I'm out of here!"

Good riddance, Saint was about to say.

And then he saw the tripwire.

"STOP!" Saint yelled.

Worowski's hand, though, was already on the door.

It was Saint's son. Bobby's twin.

One of the men who'd executed his entire family.

John Saint was caught behind a collapsed girder, pinned in place against it, his arm extended as far as it could go, trying desperately to grab hold of his gun, which lay just out of his reach.

He looked up at Castle and snarled.

"You sonuvabitch."

Castle moved closer.

"Nice biceps," he said, squeezing one of John's arms. "You must work out."

"Fuck you."

"Ever try isometrics?" Castle reached into his weapons bag then and pulled out a soapdish charge.

"This antipersonnel mine weighs eight pounds. Not much, I know, but hold it with your arm stretched out like that . . . helluva workout."

He slapped it into John Saint's open palm, then closed the man's fingers around it. Then he tied the trip wire to the girder.

Saint's eyes widened in horror as he realized what Castle was doing. "You sick bastard." Saint struggled a moment, trying to free his legs, then fell back, helpless.

Castle shook his head. "I'd save your strength." He pointed at the charge. "You let your fingers relax on that, even an inch, and—boom. Know what I mean?"

"Castle," Saint pleaded. "Please. Don't leave me like this."

The man's hand was quivering already, Frank saw. He doubted Saint would be able to hold the charge more than another minute, two at the outside.

He smiled at the man.

"Boom," he said, and headed for the stairwell.

Somehow, he was still alive.

The club behind him was a burning husk, a ruin, but he'd made it out into the street, and here was the Bentley, parked right there in front of him, on the entrance ramp, almost as if it had all been planned.

He would go home, Saint decided. Not home as in the mansion, but home as in Alachua. He was a realist, Howard Saint was. The governor's mansion was not possible for him, not right now. Too much had happened these last few days, these last few hours. The press would eat him alive. The Toros were another problem. Fifty million: he'd have to give them everything he owned and then some.

No, Alachua was definitely the answer. A place to chill for a couple weeks, maybe even longer. Let Castle try to follow him into the swamps: he'd have the man for breakfast. Feed him to the gators, lose his body in the swamps . . . no one would ever find him.

"Howard Saint!"

The voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Howard Saint."

There was no escaping that voice, he realized. No escaping the man who went along with it.

He turned around and locked eyes with Frank Castle.

"You took everything from me," Castle said. "Everything."

Saint met his anger and matched it. "You killed my son."

At that instant, a scream came from the club behind him. That was John, Saint realized, and, just as he thought that, another explosion shook the ground.

"Both of them, now," Castle said. "Both your sons."

It took Saint an instant to understand his meaning.

And only an instant longer to draw the gun from his holster and squeeze the trigger.

But he wasn't fast enough.

Castle's bullet caught him square in the chest, and he went to his knees. He tried to raise the gun again, but he managed to get his arm only halfway up before it fell, and he toppled onto his side.

A shadow fell over him. Castle.

"Gloat all you want, asshole," Saint managed. "I still win. I still killed your family."

Castle reached into his pocket then, and dropped papers on him. No, not papers. Photographs. What . . .

"I win," Castle said. "I made you kill your best friend."

For a second, Saint didn't understand. Then his eyes fell on a picture of Quentin in bed with a woman, no, a girl, she was barely developed at all, tiny breasts, and—

Oh, God.

"I made you kill your wife," Castle said, dropping something else to the ground, something that sparkled as it fell. A piece of jewelry.

Livia's other earring.

Saint squeezed his eyes shut, begging the voices in his head to be quiet, the voices that were suddenly screaming

at him, Quentin's voice, Livia's voice, telling him what a fool he'd been, what a gullible, murdering fool . . .

"And now I've killed you."

Castle knelt down then, and was tying something around Saint's ankle. Rope? No, something thicker. A belt. Saint looked up and saw the man tying the other end of it to the limo. What . . . ?

Castle opened the door of the limo and disappeared inside the car a second. Then he stepped out, looked down at Saint again, and gave the Bentley a gentle push.

It began rolling down the club's entrance ramp, heading straight for the parking lot of Saint Motors, dragging him right along with it.

"No!" Howard Saint screamed. "Castle!"

One thirty-eight. He reached into his weapons bag and took out the detonator. He pressed it—once, twice, a dozen times. With each touch of the button, another car on the Saint Motors lot behind him exploded.

Castle turned to survey his work.

Of course, it was hard to get the full impact from street level. But it was an impressive display, nonetheless. Probably even more so for Howard Saint, who had been dragged clear across the road behind the limo, into the center of the Saint Motors lot. Where he lay now, screaming as he watched his life go up in flames around him.

Time now, Castle thought, for Howard Saint to go up in flames too.

One thirty-nine. He took the second detonator from the bag and ran his thumb over the button. Once, twice, and then a third time, for luck, even though—as he'd told Jimmy Weeks—Frank Castle was not a betting man.

Then he flicked it down.

The Bentley exploded. Howard Saint's screams stopped.

One-forty. The pattern was complete. The mission was finished.

Only one thing left to do and then he, at last, could rest as well.

FORTY-FOUR

Chief Edwin Morris did not appreciate being woken at two in the morning. He especially did not appreciate that it was Danny Palmer waking him, as the little shit of a reporter was one of his least favorite people in the world.

He liked it even less that Palmer was waking him with news that Morris and his department should have, by rights, known first. Their bad luck; the *Times* had a news chopper up and had just happened by the scene.

Morris was up in his chopper now, and he saw that the news Palmer had relayed was at least accurate: Saint Motors was on fire. So was Saint's club, right next to it.

Morris turned to Sergeant Kuipers, riding in the seat behind him.

"Get Howard Saint on the phone!" he yelled.

"Been trying to!" Kuipers shouted back. "No answer."

"Keep trying!"

Kuipers nodded. Morris turned back around.

That was odd, the chief thought. Two of Howard Saint's businesses on fire, and the man wasn't answering his phone? Hell, it wasn't just odd, it was disturbing. What if Saint had been at the club and had been trapped in the fire? What if he was dead?

At that second, his cell rang, and Morris sighed in relief. Saint. Had to be.

Then he looked down at the number on the display and frowned.

"Palmer, I'm busy. What do you want?"

"I want you to see something."

"Can't it wait? I'm coming up on the scene now."

"I know. I can see you."

"What?" Morris frowned. "Where are you?"

"Couple blocks north, couple hundred feet above you."

Morris looked. Sure enough, there was the *Times* chopper, flying just far enough away that he couldn't order them down for safety reasons. Damn the man.

"So what is it you want me to see?"

"The pattern. You should be in range now."

"A pattern? What in hell's name are you talking about? What kind of pattern?"

"The cars in the lot are burning in a pattern. Have your pilot pull up. You'll see it."

"I don't have time for games, Palmer."

"I don't think it's a game, Chief. Go on. Take a look."

Morris sighed and gave the order.

They didn't have to go far. A couple hundred feet, just like Palmer had said, before the arrangement took shape.

"Christ on a bicycle," Morris said, shaking his head. "You don't see that every day."

The chief, in fact, had never seen anything like it before. Palmer was right: the burning cars did indeed make a pattern. A disturbing pattern, as disturbing in its own way as the fact that he couldn't raise Howard Saint on the phone.

The pattern was a skull.

A weird, creepy skull.

Two-forty. He parked in front of 2411 North Cedar, and collected what remained of his gear.

Two forty-one. He entered his apartment, and sat, numb with exhaustion, and pain, and relief. Spent, body and soul. A dead man, inside and out, as were the Castles, the Castigliones, and the McCareys alike.

Now, at last, it was time to join them.

He picked up his father's Colt and chambered a round. With his left hand, he reached for the picture.

Maria. Will.

He kissed them, then set the photo down on the desk.

He pressed the barrel of the gun to his chin, just as he'd been taught. Just as Weeks had done. He pictured his friend,

then, and wondered if there really was a heaven or a hell. Maria thought so. He hoped she was right.

He pictured her, then, the way he always did, that first summer after they were married. The way she'd looked as they were saying good-bye, as he was getting shipped off to Kuwait for Desert Storm, her long bangs hanging down over her forehead, her eyes misting over with tears.

"You're my hero, Frank Castle," she'd told him; and Castle smiled at the memory, because maybe now it was true. Maybe, at last, he really was her hero, because this last mission had been for her, for the family.

His finger tightened on the trigger.

And then he remembered the conversation they'd had that day; the whole thing, not just the part where she'd called him a hero, but what had come before, as well.

He'd been blocking it out for a long, long time, he realized.

"Kuwait?" she'd asked as they said their good-byes. "I don't even know where that is."

"A long way from here," he'd replied. "A long way from you."

She'd grabbed his hand then, and squeezed it between hers. "Frank. You take care. If anything happens to you—"

He put a finger to her lips. "Shhh."

But there was no silencing her.

"If anything happens to you, I'll kill myself."

He'd shaken his head then, as forcefully as he could.

"Never say that. Never. If I die, you go on and have a great life. You promise?"

"I couldn't." She started crying then. "I couldn't forget you."

"Don't. Never forget me. But live. You promise? Live."

She smiled. "Okay. On one condition."

"No conditions."

"One condition," she said again. "You promise the same."

"Okay. I promise."

Castle blinked, and suddenly he was back in the loft. The gun was still in his hand, the picture was right where he'd left it on the table. . . .

And his family—all of them—were still dead.

But he was alive. And he'd made a promise.

The gun slipped from his fingers.

At that second, someone knocked at the door.

"Frank? Are you there?"

Joan. She knocked again.

"Frank?"

He sighed, and rose to his feet. "Yes," he called back. "Yes, I'm here."

14 October 0624

Breakfast in Alabama. Joe's Country Kitchen. Two eggs sunny-side up, two strips of bacon, hash, and toast. Coffee. I'm on my third cup as I write this.

Called Joan at the diner; Dave is fine. They're all fine, more so now that they found what I left for them. Saint's money: about time someone put it to good use.

She's a good person, Joan. Made a bad turn, finding her way back now. The way she felt about me . . . someone'll feel that way about her soon, and then she'll be all the way back. She'll be home. As for me . . . I have no home. Not now.

There was a message from Sandoval in the paper this morning. USA Today, the Personals section. Same code the bureau's been using for the last two months; you'd think that after I popped up again, after my first few days in Tampa, they would have thought to change it. You'd be wrong.

Message is simple. Direct orders from Sandoval to all bureau operatives, covert or otherwise: Find Frank Castle and bring him in. Dead or alive.

Guess they don't appreciate my help. Not that I give a flying fuck. I have work to do. In avenging my family, I've found new purpose.

I'm coming. All of you out there, I'm coming. Those who do evil to others-the killers, the rapists, psychos, sadists-take heed. You will come to know me well.

But don't make the same mistake Sandoval did. Don't call me Castle. Frank Castle is dead.

Call me the Punisher.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to:

Gerry Conway and Ross Andru for bringing the Punisher to life.

Jonathan Hensleigh and Michael Tolkin for reimagining Frank Castle's story in a pedal-to-the-metal screenplay.

The good people at Artisan, in particular Paul David, Amorette Jones, and Steven Komarnitsky.

Keith Clayton and Steve Saffel, my editors at Ballantine/ Del Rey.

Nancy Delia, the Ballantine production editor.

Nora Reichard, the fastest, most thorough copyeditor in the east, west, north, and south.

Ms. Richie C. herself.

And, of course, Stan Lee, without whom neither comic, film, novelization, or the MMS itself would exist.

For those who enjoyed this particular iteration of Frank Castle, see: www.punishermovie.com.

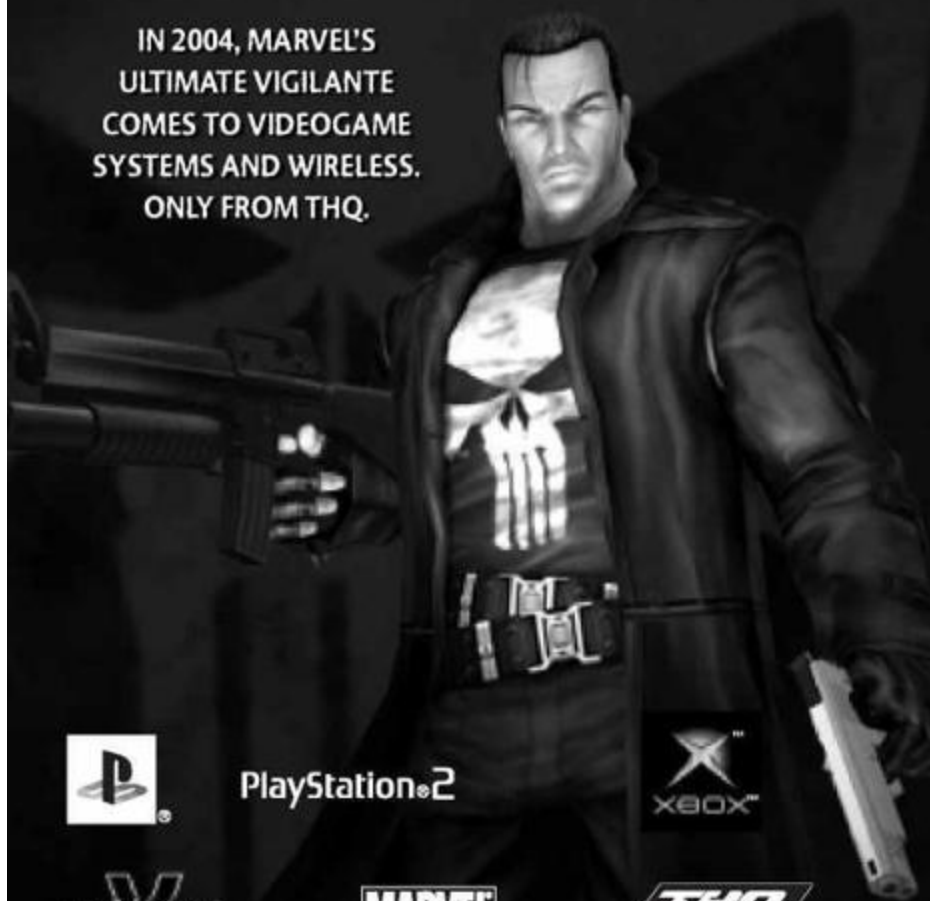
Finally, thanks to my family for enduring the "punishment" right along with me.

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eISBN : 978-0-307-41733-6

www.randomhouse.com

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